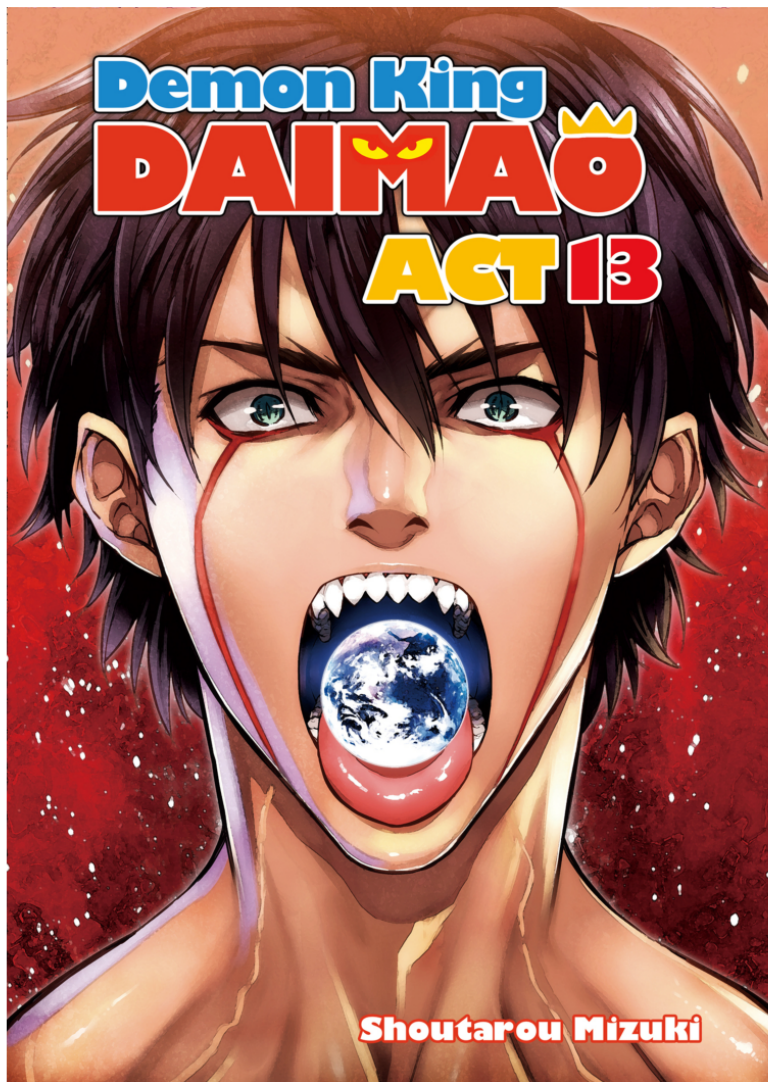


Demon King
DAIMAÔ
ACT 13



Shoutarou Mizuki





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Foreword

Finally, I feel like writing this. By “this”, of course, I mean this story.

Before I do that, though, I need to talk to you a little about what stories are.

We read stories. These stories can be movies. TV shows. Manga. Books. Anything.

Of course, we read to enjoy. But “enjoying” something like this means wondering how it’s going to end... or at least, it does a lot of the time. In other words, there’s an expectation that there’ll be some kind of end.

Of course, there are probably stories where you’ve said, “This is going to end soon, and I wish it wouldn’t.” But even in those cases, you only say that because you know stories have endings.

Put bluntly, stories are either about whether the protagonists die or are saved. That’s why any stories that move people - and I include myself in this - begin with an ending. This goes for both tragedy and comedy, too. Complex chains of events all lead up to a conclusion, where a combination of coincidences and human action collide and explode into one ultimate point! And this point is why “stories” exist. A character’s “fate,” whether it’s a happy ending or the Grim Reaper’s scythe, exists only for the purposes of the ending.

And if you’ve read this series so far, you know that stories are fictional, and yet control so much of our lives.

In other words... Yes. We think of stories starting from the ending.

A man meets a woman... and they get together, or they break up.

A crime is committed... The culprit is caught, or escapes.

A life is lived... It ends in happiness, or destruction.

Every choice we make is infected with the virus we call “stories”. Our own free will has nothing to do with it. People can’t perceive time objectively. Instead, they perceive it as a story.

It was just after the turn of the millennium, I think. I was in front of a condo in Yamato City, in Kanagawa Prefecture, when I got a call from an old friend. I thought they were calling to go hang

out, but instead they were telling me that my ex-girlfriend, who I'd broken up with six months ago, had died. I hadn't talked to her once since we broke up, but my friend had heard what happened from someone else.

"Huh? Really?"

"Really. Once I know more, I'll call you."

"Wow... You're sure about this?"

"Yeah. Anyway, that's what's up..."

"Okay, got it. Thanks for letting me know."

That's how I remember the conversation. Completely devoid of meaning. I didn't feel depressed or confused. I didn't feel much of anything. But the next day, when I got a call from that same friend to tell me how she died, for some reason, I felt like something was chasing after me.

I felt cold and scared, and the sweat wouldn't stop dripping down my cheeks.

It wasn't that her death finally felt real to me, or anything like that. It never did feel "real" to me. I wasn't going to ever see her again, anyway. The fact that I couldn't, even if I wanted to, didn't change a thing.

The cause of her death was something stupid and ridiculous.

She'd had a bad headache, and taken a little more of the medicine she always took than she was supposed to. It wasn't suicide by sleeping pills. She was used to the medicine, and sometimes she'd taken more of it and suffered no ill effects. The direct cause of death was similar to what's known as "Economy Class Syndrome": an arterial blood clot.

The cause of death was sleeping in the same position for many hours, without getting any water.

The words "If only I hadn't broken up with her..." flashed through my mind. Not to brag, but I'm pretty good at taking care of other people. I would've kept track of how much medicine she was taking, and made sure she was getting some mild exercise every day.

But that was actually the reason she'd broken up with me. She'd found that part of me annoying, she said.

—*Maybe she'd still be alive today...* I thought. If only I'd taken care of her...

No, but of course, that was impossible. It was impossible, but still...

That was what was freaking me out so much. She'd chosen a death that was close to a suicide. No, she had something within her personality that made her more likely than others to die. She was oblivious to her own physical condition, but sensitive to anything that threatened her mind. She chose passivity over action. And her personality was inclined to interpret goodwill as a personal attack. Over the long term, in every respect she was continually choosing death.

Most people say that animals that choose to kill themselves are insane. Supposedly, lemmings committed suicide en masse, but we know now that that's a lie. (The lie got started when a certain documentary faked them jumping off a cliff.)

There are lots of confirmed cases of animals committing suicide, but as we research them more, we learn that almost all of these are caused either by parasites or poison from another animal. The hairworm, for instance, infects the body of a praying mantis and causes it to jump in the water. Hairworms can only reproduce in water, so they kill their host and then escape into the water.

There's also a certain type of bee that can control a cockroach's brain after it implants it with its eggs. The poison it injects steals the cockroach's free will, and makes it so that even as the larvae hatch and devour its body, it doesn't feel any pain. And for as long as it's possible for the cockroach to walk, the bee leads it to its nest. So it's literally walking toward its own grave.

Humans, of course, are living creatures too. So shouldn't we try to live, no matter what happens? Doesn't that mean that suicide should be impossible?

Yes. Humans never die of their own free will.

So what is "suicide", then? There can only be one answer. Somebody is controlling our brains. I'll say it again. Our minds are infected with a virus called "stories" that someone has injected us with. That's why humans commit suicide. That's why they do reckless things, and die.

But while stories are parasites, they can also bring gifts to humanity. People can't perceive time objectively. They perceive time as stories. And sentience couldn't have been born without the ability to perceive time. Stories are what make us conscious beings.

So what happens if we give up stories? No. We have to give them up. If we don't, we're finished.

All stories have an end. And when that time comes for

humanity, it means our destruction. And when that time comes, we'll know why the being who planted stories within us did so.

Will something hatch from within our brains?

Or after death, will we be devoured by some huge creature?

And if that's true, can we give up stories now?

As primitive humans, we must think about what it was that gave rise to "stories".

So... Let's go see.

1 - Even in Hell, We Live Our Lives

Junko refused to move away from Akuto, and Akuto didn't try to push her away. There was a forest in front of them, and they had to enter it. That was unnerving enough on its own, but this was the afterlife. Well, they didn't know exactly where they were, but this was all they could call it.

Either way, they had no idea where they were or why they were here.

Ahead, forest.

Behind, sea.

And the forest and the sea seemed to go on forever. They were standing on a beach.

Akuto thought to himself that waves crashing on a beach were the perfect background to the apocalypse.

"This is different than VPS... No, maybe it's the same? But what we're seeing..."

"Yeah. It kind of feels like... exactly how I expected the afterlife to look like," Junko said as she looked into the forest.

"Dante's Divine Comedy... starts in a forest, doesn't it?"

"I know what you mean. But we never really believed anything like that. We just know what's in the Christian books, and associate that with the afterlife. But you're right. It's strange that this would seem exactly like the afterlife."

Akuto took Junko by the hand and gestured toward the forest.

"Either way, the forest is the only place to go."

The beach didn't go on forever. It was blocked on either side by sheer cliffs.

"Y-Yeah... But it's a little scary, you know? There's no path..."

Junko followed him into the forest, trembling.

"No, I can just make a path for us..." Akuto began, but just after he moved two or three trees out of the way, a path appeared.

"That's... helpful. I guess there is a path," Junko said, with a forced smile on her face.

"I guess that means people have been here before," Akuto commented, stepping onto the path and looking ahead.

It was a solid dirt path, with no weeds or grass growing on it,

that snaked through the forest. From here, he couldn't see where it ended.

"Does that mean somebody's here? I-I hope not..." Junko looked around, worried.

"There's nothing to worry about," Akuto said, heading forward.

"Of course I'm worried. Whoever's here is already dead..." Junko said, following after him.

"So are we."

"Well, it doesn't really feel that way..."

"Most of humanity must be dead. So if everybody we know is already here, it can't be that much more dangerous than it was before."

"Y-You know, you really adapt to things fast..."

As she traveled down the path, Junko's trembling footsteps began to get a little more steady. She was still scared, though. But since she refused to let go of Akuto's arm, he dropped his speed to match hers.



"It's the same here too, I guess," Akuto said.

"What is? This place seems really different than the world when we were alive..."

"No, I mean the fact that we can still see clearly even though we're in a forest. Didn't you notice? There's light here."

She looked around and found that he was right.

"Yeah. You're right... I didn't see any sun, but we could still see on the beach."

"The leaves block out the sky here, too. There's no light, but we can see. That's what it means, I guess."

"Considering we're in the afterlife... Maybe it's not that strange. Oh, right. In the Divine Comedy, isn't this about where the beasts show up?" Junko said, her voice trembling.

And just then, with perfect timing, they heard a distant howl.

"Aah!" Junko screamed

Akuto, however, could tell that it was a four legged beast, perhaps a lion or a wolf. It seemed, if anything, to be a little too precise a match with the book.

"I used to work in a zoo, and I've never heard an animal roar like that."

"R-Really? Then is it a monster or something?" Junko's voice was still shaking.

"It seems unlikely... And anyway, it didn't seem like there was anything alive in this forest until now."

"Oh, you're right..." Junko nodded.

The roaring stopped.

"Hmm..." Akuto said to himself, as if he'd figured something out.

"Which means that there'll be a town at the end of the path."

Junko's eyes went wide.

"No way. That's impo-"

Her sentence cut off midway. The path curved gently before reaching the end of the forest. Below them was a town. They were standing on the mountain overlooking the school, and beyond it, the imperial capital.

"W-What the hell is going on here?" Junko said, confused.

The capital looked peaceful, just like it did before the war. It felt like they'd gone back in time. From the position of the sun, it was likely a little past noon. The strange jump in time only made

the dizziness she was feeling stronger. Akuto seemed to have seen it coming, but he was still a little spooked.

“I knew it... But this is still a little surprising.”

“W-What is it you knew?” She grabbed him tightly. She was shocked, but more than that, she didn’t know why it seemed like Akuto knew what was going on.

“I’m not sure, but I think this place reflects our desires.” Akuto answered

“Our desires? I’m not sure I follow.”

“It feels to me like everything that I’m seeing is something you’re thinking about.”

“Sure, it did feel like the things that I was scared of actually happened...” Junko nodded as if she understood.

“Yeah. It explains how we could see without light. And that roar in the forest.”

“Maybe, but...” Junko closed her eyes and concentrated her mind. A few seconds later, she opened them.

“You’re sure about this?”

“If this world... If the afterlife reflects our thoughts, then maybe only strong thoughts work.”

“Basic magical training means I should be able to create strong thoughts...”

Junko made a mana ball in her hand and spun it.

“You may only be able to do that because you’re used to doing it so much. Given what this world is, my thoughts should be the strongest. What we saw at the beach may have been caused by my subconscious... I wasn’t able to control my fear and uneasiness then.”

“Maybe, but...”

“Which gives me a hint as to this world’s possibilities, and its limits...” Akuto said, but then a voice interrupted them.

“Hello!”

It was Yoshie Kita, walking down the path towards them.

“Kita?”

“Yoshie?”

The two stared at her in surprise. It was indeed Yoshie Kita.

“From the look on your faces, you don’t really think it’s me, huh?”

“Of course not. I mean...”

Yoshie cut Junko off before she could continue.

“No, I understand. It makes sense. I just got here, so I’m not 100% sure what’s going on. But this phenomenon... No, this ‘event’ I guess you could call it...”

She was talking just like Yoshie usually talked. This time it was Akuto who cut her off with a chuckle.

“Essentially, we’re in a place where the wishes of the dead are granted.”

Yoshie grinned and nodded.

“You’ve got it. You always were a smart one, Akuto.”

Junko looked at them and shook her head in confusion.

“I heard that too. But if that’s the case, then it’s weird that you’re here, isn’t it? I mean, it’s possible that you only exist because Akuto or I want to see you, but...” She frowned.

She was right. If Yoshie was only there because of their wishes, there was no way of saying if she was real. But Yoshie was unconcerned.

“Of course, you’re right. But even if that’s the case, what’s the problem?”

“Huh? Are you saying... that it isn’t a problem?” Junko said, surprised.

“I’ve got memories from before I saw you. Of course, it’s possible that those memories were only created in this instant... but anyway, according to those memories, as long as you don’t think too deeply about it, you can survive here just fine,” she said, confidently.

“So we’re... safe here?” Junko said, uneasily. Yoshie nodded.

“You can pass messages from other people, and people can disagree. It feels like people have individual personalities here. Of course, I’ve got my own personality, as you know. I’ve doubted and investigated. But you know, it’s impossible to PROVE that anybody really is an independent, thinking person. So I just decided not to think about it.”

Yoshie pointed towards the town.

“Look. The town’s filled with people. It works, even when we’re not looking at it. Our lives, at least, are just like they used to be.”

Akuto raised an eyebrow. Something seemed off to him about that.

“What does that last part mean?” Yoshie shrugged, as if it was something that was hard to answer.

“Of course, a lot of stuff’s different. The student council

president should explain it, not me. I'll just make it more complicated than it needs to be," Yoshie said, and then continued walking ahead of them. It was clear she was going to lead them to the school

"We're going to school?" Junko asked, with a hint of nostalgia.

"That's right. It's the easiest place to live around here." School seemed to be in session, and no students were outside. But when they looked at the windows, the class was filled with students.

"I guess it's just like it used to be," Akuto said.

"Some things you'll find are going to surprise you, though," Yoshie said, and then called the student council president on her student handbook. Then she took Akuto to her.

Of course, the school was just as it had been before, and Akuto didn't need anybody to show him the way. Lily, who had evidently been called out of class, said, "You're probably curious about this place, aren't you?" and then pulled up a mana screen on the desk to show him the data the "gods" were displaying.

"You might have expected more of an introduction, but to me, it doesn't feel like any time has passed. You don't seem like that unusual of a visitor to me," Lily said, offering Akuto a seat.

"To me, this is a touching reunion," Akuto said, and he meant it, but Lily just grinned sardonically.

"Stop it. I don't want to hear that from the guy who blew up the world."

She motioned for him to look at the mana screen's data. It was a list of statistics about the residents of the current empire.

"This is the world from before I was determined to be the Demon King, isn't it?" Akuto said, figuring out what she wanted to show him after just a short glimpse through the list.

"You're so smart it's honestly annoying, you know." Lily sighed.

"But it helps a lot. I don't have all these stats memorized. So let's go back as far as we can."

Lily began to go back through the years of recorded statistics. Akuto looked at them and nodded.

"Yeah, these all match what I remember. Go back to the present. In a few minutes, the new list of births should come in. If they're right, it means that we're redoing history."

"In other words... we're in the afterlife, but it's a reflection of how the world was about two years before we died?" Junko asked.

Lily shook her head.

“It’s similar, but no. I’m sure you’ve noticed, but there are no Liradans here.”



“There aren’t?” Junko said in shock.

“Nope. The ‘trio’ is down to a ‘duo,’ since Arnoul is gone.

Korone and the laborer Liradans are gone too. Humans are doing all the work needed to keep civilization running. And...”

Akuto cut Lily off before she could finish.

“Keena.”

“Yup. Keena. Everybody else is here, but she isn’t.”

“These are the only two changes?” Junko asked Lily.

“The Empress is Kazuko. And there’s no record of the black mages being oppressed. That’s about the size of it, honestly.”

“Which means?”

“It’s peaceful. So peaceful that I’m getting bored. No black mage rebellion. No attempt by Zero to rule over humanity. No records of the Republic. Or of other countries opposing the Empire.”

Lily crossed her arms and put her elbows on the desk.

“That’s the reason I’m not surprised to see you. You’re not the Demon King.”

“Really?” Akuto asked.

Lily nodded.

“Are you happy? You may not believe it, but the Demon King is dead. He never revived, either. There’s no rumors about him. It’s kind of a letdown, honestly.”

Akuto’s face said that he didn’t know quite how to process this.

“I-It’s not a bad thing. Yeah, that’s right. It’s a good thing...”

Junko whispered, clearly stunned. But she didn’t seem like she really meant it, and she kept staring at Akuto to try and discern how he really felt about the matter.

“A different timeline? Or maybe this is just the world someone wanted...” Akuto suggested. “We have our own memories of the past. Does that mean that other people don’t?”

He frowned.

“Talking about time makes things complicated, but...” Yoshie started to talk, but Lily cut her off.

“And nobody wants complicated, so shut up. The only people who have their memories are those people who got involved with you and know the truth.”

“That’s right. She told me not to talk to you about time, but there is one thing I have to at least brief you on. Time traveling technology was something from the future that only Boichiro

Yamato had. You remember that, right?” Yoshie asked.

“I do. But the device I used was...”

“A different type of technology. That’s why... and maybe this is obvious, but... Brave isn’t here. He got the time traveling device from Boichiro, probably.”

Lily pulled up the demographics on the screen again.

“Hiroshi Miwa’s name is here. Which means he’s ‘here,’ but we just haven’t seen him yet.”

“Keena was never here to begin with... but Hiroshi was, huh?” Akuto mused aloud.

“So then, where did he go?”



Hiroshi was in the forest outside the town, meeting with a man whose existence he’d not once forgotten.

“Boichiro Yamato...”

He’d come here after his death the same way Junko and the others had. He, however, had taken another path. He’d gone into the depths of the forest, as if something was guiding him, and before too long he was standing in front of Boichiro. He didn’t know if it was fate, or if he’d wanted to see the man. But it felt like this was part of what he had to do.

He had lots of questions he had to ask. And after Boichiro’s death, he’d never gotten a chance to ask them.

“I met someone on your team,” Hiroshi said sarcastically.

“From the look of it, they gave you a rough time. They’re a rowdy bunch,” Boichiro said, laughing as if Hiroshi was an old friend. He was calmer than Hiroshi remembered him, and handsome, and there was something about him that charmed the person he was speaking to. Hiroshi had planned on complaining, but was beginning to change his mind.

“They almost killed me. A lot of times. Did you tell them to?”

“Of course not. I knew they were like that, but I couldn’t inspire them to change. All I can do is apologize.”

“I don’t need you to apologize. Did those guys all come here when they died? If they did, I want to find them and give them a piece of my mind.”

“I wouldn’t know. I assume if they did, they’d be too embarrassed to come find me,” Boichiro smiled.

“They should be too embarrassed to talk to anyone.

“Your plan... No, I don’t know if it’s your plan... but they either misunderstood it or deliberately changed it, and did something that sent a bunch of people here.”

Hiroshi decided to be a little roundabout with his words, but Boichiro knew what he meant.

“Yeah. I knew that might happen. And I’d resigned myself to it, too.”

“You sound resigned about everything.”

“Correct. I don’t want to speak ill of the dead. But I did try to stop this.”

His words just further annoyed Hiroshi.

“What are you trying to say? Just say it,” he said, his voice shaking with rage.

“I’ll explain things in the order they happened. You know that I tried to change history, yes?” Boichiro said, with a self-deprecating smile.

“Yeah, I do.”

“This was because I saw the last great demon king awaken, and the gods come from the outer universe to destroy this world.”

“I know that too. You said that you needed a ritual between the demon king and the Law of Identity to stop that, right? I didn’t really understand the words you used.”

“Correct. And I failed,” Hiroshi nodded, thinking back on the past as Boichiro spoke.

“I know that much. Zero and the other mechanical gods wanted the Law of Identity to save them, so they tried to turn humanity into data, like they were, and send them to another dimension. That way, it wouldn’t matter if mankind was destroyed. And boss tried to stop them and buy humanity time.”

“That’s right. And as a result, the future turned into something different than what I knew.”

“And that was a mistake? Is that what you’re saying?” Hiroshi asked.

Boichiro just sighed.

“It’s hard to answer that question at its core. In fact, this afterlife is essentially the ‘time’ the Demon King bought. It’s not over yet.”

“It’s not?” Hiroshi asked, confused.

“But this place may be the end. Perhaps there is an end without

an ending. An ending where time is eternal, like this.”

Hiroshi sighed as well, this time in exasperation.

“Start making some damn sense.”

“I’m sorry. This is how I’ve always been. It’s not something I can do anything about,” he said. “This isn’t the future I knew, but the ending is exactly as I predicted. I know what happened in the history that you know. I attempted to negotiate with The One, their avatar, in order to make a contract with them. I thought they wanted a world where they wouldn’t have to invade other universes as well.”

Hiroshi tried his best to understand what he meant. If he pulled it apart and thought about each individual element, he found he could follow.

“But The One betrayed you.”

“Correct. And the once-calm Republic decided to invade the Empire. All these elements may seem separate, but when you understand that the invasion from the outer universe was behind them, you understand that they were all predicted, and are all connected. The devices left behind by early magical civilization. The plots of the black mages. The faceless power. These were all to prepare for the invasion. And the success of the invasion means that in the end, we failed to change the future.”

“When you put it that way, I guess I understand it. But if this place is safe for us, if it’s the ‘time’ we’ve been given, then are we still safe?” Hiroshi asked. Boichiro just sighed.

“Still safe? What do you mean?”

This time it was Boichiro’s turn to ask a question.

“There’s still a chance to change the past, right? I think it’s simple. Get rid of magical civilization. Or have Earth stop fighting with each other and prepare a plan to deal with the Gods from outer space.” Hiroshi spoke confidently, as he gestured down at the bracelet on his wrist that held the Brave suit.

“This can travel through time, right? Does that work even when you’re dead?”

“You’re jumping the gun. So you want to save humanity, is what you’re saying?”

Boichiro’s eyes went wide in surprise.

“I don’t know, but I’m feeling something like fate. At least the Demon King should be able to save humanity, right?” Hiroshi grinned.

"If that is your will, then very well. But it's difficult to change the future." Boichiro shook his head.

"I don't know about that. You said the future changed when you died. So it's not that hard to change it if change is all you want, right?"

"No, it didn't change. In the end, I end up here," Boichiro said, pointing down to his feet with a sarcastic expression.

"Here?"

"The afterlife."

"That's hard to understand. There are so many worlds, you know. Earth. Virtual Phase Space. Other dimensions. The outer universe. The afterlife... did I miss any?" Hiroshi frowned.

Boichiro corrected him.

"That's a little off. 'Other dimension' and 'outer universe' are two words for the same thing. We don't know a lot about other dimensions, except that there's probably infinite numbers of them. But as for the others, you're correct. And the Law of Identity is involved in them all. It's likely that she made them. And that's why they're relatively easy to understand."

"Keena made them? Is that why we can understand them?"

"To me, it's Rimu Sudo that made them. By 'understandable' I mean that it's easy to explain how this world works. All you need to understand is that our universe was made by the Law of Identity."

"Is it that simple? And anyway, weren't we talking about going through time to change history?" Hiroshi asked, confused. He wasn't even sure what he wanted from this conversation anymore.

Boichiro laughed a little.

"If you're going to go through time, I want you to understand that our knowledge and our world contradict each other."

"Aren't we getting sidetracked again?"

"We aren't. What is our understanding of time?"

It was an abstract question, but Hiroshi realized it was something critical to the core of their problems. If he was going to start the world over and avoid this ending, he needed to understand what time actually was. And at school, he'd learned the physical definition of time.

He repeated what the textbooks had told him.

"Time is relative. It's the same thing as space in which matter moves," he said. "As speed goes up, the space you can move to increases, and so does the probability that you'll encounter various

events. But matter can only move in one direction. Expressed in two dimensions, it's like only being able to choose one point within an expanding ripple on a lake."

"That's more or less right. One thing cannot exist at multiple points in space at the same time. But here that law doesn't apply. That's why I was able to go back in time."

Boichiro picked up a branch and used it to draw a line on the ground.

"The reason that something can't exist in multiple places at once is that, in fact, time has a minimum unit size. If it could be infinitely divided, then the paradox of the tortoise and Achilles would be made real."

He drew a symbol at the center of the line on the ground. And then another at the center of the right side of the newly divided line. He repeated this process 32 times, until the symbol itself was larger than the divided line.

"Imagine this symbol as the minimum unit size of time, and you'll understand."

"I can understand that. But what does that have to do with it being possible to go back in time? Doesn't that make it so going back in time is impossible?"

"Correct. In the model with the rippling lake, the other points on the circle are just probabilities. In other words, they might have happened, but they didn't. Even if matter returns to the point it was in before, the other matter is no longer there. But the world that we know is not like the lake."

He erased the line with his foot, and drew another.

"This world is, according to standard physics, impossible. This world is like a video, or a book. It's linear."

Boichiro drew several squares above the line, with the number of squares increasing as the line moved to the right.

"Here, all matter exists simultaneously. The past continues to exist. Imagine blocks being piled up on top of other blocks. And these blocks can be rearranged."

"And that's why it's possible to rewrite the past, and change the future." Hiroshi nodded in understanding.

"Correct. It's possible to change it," Boichiro said.

"Then tell me how to use the suit." Hiroshi pointed to the bracelet on his arm.

"Of course, I will. But as I've been saying this whole time, it's

pointless.” He furrowed his eyebrows in frustration.

“You keep saying that. It’s possible to change the future, but it’s pointless?”

“That’s what I said at the start. For some reason, you always come here in the end.” He pointed to the ground.

“In other words, the afterlife.” Hiroshi frowned.

Boichiro’s expression remained the same.

“Correct. And to this place, and this instant. You’ll come here again and again.”

2 - Eternal Happiness

“Okay, time for school to start!” Mitsuko Torii said, her voice loud as she drew out the words of her announcement.

“They said an asteroid hit the Earth, but it seems to have all worked out. Good news, huh?”

She laughed, and for the first time the students laughed loudly too.

“I guess it was the Demon King that brought the asteroid, huh?”

“And Brave died trying to lessen the damage?”

The classroom was filled with voices.

“But you know, I thought I was a goner when I saw the asteroid hit. I don’t know when everything went back to normal,” Mitsuko said, not particularly interested in the topic.

They seemed to be at the point several days after Akuto had come to school. Akuto and Junko had joined the class midway, and from the things Mitsuko was saying and the curious gazes of the students, they were able to figure out what was going on.

Many people didn’t realize that they’d died.

They knew something was wrong, but the world was the same as ever, and there was none of the suffering of war. Their lives hadn’t changed in any way, so there was no sense in realizing that they were dead. What really surprised him though, was how his classmates treated him.

His magical power hadn’t changed at all, but none of them seemed to fear him as the Demon King.

The class was on ordinary magic, and for Akuto, it was very simple. It felt good to see the jealous looks the other students gave him, but it felt even better to be treated like a human.

“You’re amazing, new kid. That explains why the class rep is so obsessed with you. She’s your fiancée or something, right?”

“H-Hey! Stop it!” Junko shouted, her face red, but she buried her face in Akuto’s shirt in embarrassment.

Maybe all they’d gone through had made her love deeper, because now she was making no effort to hide her feelings. Akuto, of course, didn’t mind at all.

“I think we should get used to being together a little more,”

Akuto said with a smile. Their classmates looked on, shrugging as if they realized there was no point in making fun of them.

"I'm never going to get used to being around a dangerous guy like you," Junko said, trying to hide her embarrassment. The classmates moved away to give them their space.

After class ended, Fujiko Eto, who'd heard the news, came running up and jumped at Akuto with terrifying speed.

"AKUTO! I MISSED YOU!" she said, forgetting her normal good-girl act.

For Fujiko, this meeting was a long time coming, and it was natural that she would cry. But for the students, it looked like she'd suddenly gone insane.

"H-Hold a second, Fujiko..." Akuto stammered. Fujiko seemed to regain control of herself. She adjusted her uniform, and coughed loudly enough for the students around her to hear.

"Ahem... Sorry. Akuto is an old friend of mine. Our houses were next to each other, and we would always go into each other's rooms from the second floor window..."

From the look of the wink she was giving him, this was probably something she'd made up.

—I guess it's just like when Keena rewound the world.

Akuto realized that everything was just like Lily had said. The memories of the people who were most involved in what had happened hadn't changed. Anybody else had either had their memories erased or altered. And Fujiko had arrived here ahead of the others, and realized that her memories were different than those of the people who'd come later.

"But still, Fujiko..."

"Aww, Akuto... You know you used to call me 'Big sister' when we were alone..."

Her voice got louder when she said the last part, so the people around her could hear. This was, however, news to Akuto. There were screams from both the boys and the girls, and no attempt was made to hide the other students' jealousy.

"H-Hey, get off me, Fujiko...!"

Junko leapt out from the circle of students, and things seemed about to get even more complicated. But Fujiko just smiled and put her arm around Akuto's, and then said something even more incredible.

"Oh, Hattori. I mean, Junko. We need to get along here.

Polygamy is normal in this world. And Akuto is worthy of having at least four or five wives!”



“Um, Fujiko...”

Junko unhappily went to draw her sword, before freezing when she saw how the classmates reacted.

“I knew it.”

“I hate to say it, but he can marry both Fujiko and the class rep if he wants...”

“I wonder if I could marry Sai, too.”

The students were all talking amongst themselves.

“That’s ridiculous...” Junko’s mouth fell open.

Akuto looked at Fujiko. She just wrapped her arms around him and whispered into his ear.

“This is true. You’ve been given permission to marry more than one person, which is very fortunate for us. As long as you’re willing to marry me, we can be truly husband and wife. We can live together with nobody bothering us.” Her voice was husky and seductive, and made it clear how much she’d been waiting for him.

“Students need to live a very dignified married life, you know.” A voice interrupted.

It was Yoshie, pushing past the other students. She wore a lab coat over her suit, and it was plain that she’d been busy working. The other students thought that she was a genius who’d skipped grades to graduate, and was already working as a priest.

“Kita,” Akuto said, grateful for an opportunity to distract Fujiko. He waved at her.

“Don’t call me that, it’s so formal. We’re about to get married, you know,” she grinned.

When she’d said “Things were different” the other day, this was probably the biggest thing that she’d meant. Akuto and Junko were caught so off guard that they forgot they were supposed to be keeping their unique memories a secret from the other students. They both yelled.

“MARRIAGE?”

“Did you forget the date? Haha. Akuto’s only here to get what he needs to graduate, anyway. Just take the test and be done with it. Any of the temples would be glad to have you. They’re also looking into making a special position for you that’s not restricted by faction,” Yoshie said, catching him even further off guard.

Akuto couldn’t keep up with it all, but he realized that this was everything he’d ever dreamed of. It still didn’t feel real, but

compared to everything that he'd gone through, doing the job he was given and maintaining the happiness he had seemed very simple.

—This was my dream from before I came here... from before I was told I was the Demon King..

Everything he ever wanted was in front of him. He could be of service to others, too. He had more than enough power to do it. And he had three girls who truly understood him and loved him... What more could he want?

"Is this really... okay?" Akuto said, to no one in particular.

"It is."

"It is, of course,"

Yoshie and Fujiko smiled and nodded. When she saw this, Junko's frown gradually started to turn into a smile.

"H-How do I say this... Stop it, guys. It's kind of embarrassing."

Junko buried her face in her arms. She was shaking a little.

"Don't cry. You look like you've just found happiness," Yoshie said, grinning mischievously.

"W-Well, I don't think there's anything I can say about this either..." Akuto said with a blush.

One of the classmates surrounding them started to clap, and the clapping spread out into the hallway. It was like he was a popular singer who'd just stepped out on stage.

"Oh, that's right. I came to tell you that our new home is ready." Yoshie motioned with her thumb for them to leave the room. The crowd parted to let them pass, and smiled as they walked by. If this wasn't a school, they'd be tossing flowers at them.

They passed through the arch of people, and headed out into the courtyard. There was a surface car waiting for them there. As they walked over to it, a gang called out to them. "Gang" was the only word that could describe it. Their uniforms were breaking the dress code in all sorts of ways, and they had haircuts that could only have been intended to try and frighten the other students. They were all male.

—So I guess it's not all happiness, huh? Akuto thought to himself as he looked at the biggest of them, who seemed to be their leader.

The leader stepped forward, walking out in front of his gang of thugs.

"You know, we don't like people like you. We just don't. People like us don't have anything. And we don't like people like you, who

have everything.”

Akuto remembered the man whose gruff voice he was hearing.
—*It's Takeshi... I remember him.*

He was one of Fujiko's servants. The first person to ever pick a fight with Akuto.

Akuto looked at Fujiko.

“We've got no connection at all here,” she whispered to him.

“I see. You want to fight, huh? I bet you do,” Akuto said, with a gleeful smile.

“Now, do I remember how to hold back?”

It felt good, strangely, to know that he had enemies here. Things were going so well he was getting uneasy. There were probably all kinds of fights waiting for him, and setbacks too. But that, he knew, was something he should feel happy about.

“The hell are you talking about? We've gone through a hell that spoiled rich brats like you can't imagine. You won't beat us by trying to have a stand-up fight.”

Takeshi didn't seem to think it was possible for him to lose. He wore a cruel smile.

—*Oh, he's got a special nightstick and an incantation gun. The others are ready to jump me on his signal, huh? Two have knives, and the rest all have bats and wrenches...*

In a single instant, he'd seen through their clothing and read their minds, and also knew exactly how powerful their magic was, too.

He smiled at Takeshi.

“I don't want to go into details, but let's not fight. It won't do either of us any good.”

Takeshi just laughed and began to slowly walk towards him.

“It'll do me good. But it'll be all bad for you.”

The rest of the gang laughed. And then Takeshi jumped on him without warning. It was a surprise attack, but Akuto managed to dodge just by tilting his head.

“That's dangerous, you know.”

His lack of fear just made Takeshi angrier.

“Maybe you're not as wimpy as I thought...”

He jerked his head in the direction of his gang. The rest of them began to form a circle to surround him. They were all going to jump him.

“How cowardly!” Junko shouted.

The thugs looked at her and got nasty grins on their faces.

"Oh, hey, you're cute!"

"Don't be scared. We don't hit girls, we make them feel good."

Junko's face turned bright red as they laughed. She looked like she might reach for her real sword, not her wooden one. Akuto shook his head.

"Don't hurt them. Leave it to me."

From the look on her face, not only would she beat them all, she might kill them.

"But..." she mumbled.

"It's fine. I've learned a few things. Even if you beat them up, they'll just hate you more. Which means..."

As Akuto kept talking, Takeshi seemed to reach the limits of his patience.

"Stop talking so damn much!"

He yelled and swung his right fist. It was an easily-dodged hook. But it was a trap. The punch was a feint. The real weapon was the nightstick hidden up his sleeve. If Akuto tried to dodge by moving his head again, the nightstick would slip out and strike him head on.

Akuto knew this from the start, however, so he just took a step forward and grabbed Takeshi's arm, and then easily flung him into the air.

Not just his arm.

He flung Takeshi's whole body into the sky.

"Hyah?"

Takeshi let out a strange scream as he flew through the air. Flight was one of the more difficult skills for students at the academy to master. And a thug like him, who never paid attention in class, would have no way of dealing with something so unexpected. Takeshi's body flew off into the sky, like a beach ball tossed up during a dolphin performance.

"Huh?"

His abrupt flight distracted his flunkies for an instant, and that one instant was all it took. Akuto was on them immediately, striking them each firmly in the solar plexus. He'd held back quite a bit, but it was still enough to make all of them scream in pain.

By the time Takeshi landed, all eight of them were squirming on the ground. And after he hit the ground, Akuto grabbed Takeshi by the collar and flicked him in the jaw with his index finger. Takeshi's

head flung backwards, and his brain shut down for an instant, unable to handle the violent impact. In other words, he passed out.

Akuto tossed him on the ground in front of his comrades, and nodded, satisfied.

"I'm glad you didn't kill them... but they're still all going to hate you now, right?" Junko asked in exasperation.

"Maybe, but they're not going to want to fight me now. Also, I've decided on how to deal with them in the future."

"Deal with them... how, exactly?"

"A religion, I guess? One of the old ones. They lack sympathy for others. They don't think about the future. For people like that, all you need to do is give them a goal in life. As long as they have some kind of goal, they'll blindly dedicate themselves to it. Ultimately, the traditional religions exist for the sake of people who can't think, and can't accept that their suffering is their own fault," Akuto said, a cold edge to his voice.

"Is that really enough?" Junko asked, flinching at his harsh statement. She still hadn't gotten used to the fact that sometimes he could be very cruel.

"There were people who believed in the old systems. Really believed. But now we can feel the existence of a real god, right? Someone had to have built this afterlife, after all. So they can study theology." He opened his student handbook to call Lily.

"What? You want me to ask my dad to make a new department? And then put you in charge of it?"

Lily's father was a high priest, and had the authority to do it. Using the old data, and the methods of governance used so far, it would be easy to recreate a traditional religion. Akuto nodded, satisfied that he'd found something to dedicate himself to.

"I don't know how time works here, but it's going to take years to educate people," Akuto said. His words sounded prophetic.

They weren't, however, a prophecy, but a prediction. Though that didn't make them any less accurate.

"Several years? If we spend that long here, won't we graduate?" Junko asked.

"Oh? Wasn't Akuto already planning on graduating? And that's when our new life is going to begin, right? Come on, our new home is waiting." Fujiko jerked her head in the direction of Yoshie.

"That's right. Let's get going."

Yoshie began to lead the way.

They got on a train at the school's station and rode two stations down. Yoshie led them to a high-rise near the city center. Security was tight in the building's lobby, and there was an automatic lock that kept out the lower classes. This was a living space that was only open to the chosen.

"The whole 60th floor, the penthouse, is ours," Yoshie explained, as she pushed the button for the elevator.

Akuto looked around the lobby. There was a shopping mall with a boutique, a cafe, a jewelry store, and other tenants. A whole floor of this building would be quite sizable.

"The whole thing?"

"It's less blatant than building a mansion somewhere. And we won't have to go up and down stairs, too. Our garden's going to be artificial, but there'll be aquariums and flower gardens, too. We could keep some animals if we wanted."

The button for the top floor was locked so that nobody but Akuto and his friends could get inside. Yoshie led the way, opening the door to their new home. It was sleek and modern, the style that they were all most accustomed to.

"We each have our own room, separate from Akuto's. They all have their own closets and bathrooms, so you can spend all your time in there. But we've also got a living room, a garden, a big bath, and a pool, so I'd prefer you spend your time there. And then there's..."

After showing them most of the room, she grinned mischievously as she put her hand on the last doorknob.

"The bedroom."

There was a double bed with a rococo-style canopy. In the back, there was a glass shower and sauna. The ceiling was mirrored, and the whole room was lit up with orange indirect lighting.

"This is, um..." Junko blushed and murmured to herself.

"Well done! So this is Akuto's personal bedroom, right?" Fujiko let out a scream of joy.

Yoshie, however, shook her head.

"This belongs to everybody."

"Everybody?"

"Yeah. It's for anybody who wants to use it."

"For a foursome?"

"If you're feeling up for it."

"I... I definitely am."

“Yup. I sure am.”

“...I’m not, I don’t think. I want Akuto to be mine and mine alone.”

“Well, we can work out some kind of reservation sheet, or a rotation...”

Fujiko and Yoshie began to discuss specifics, but Junko shut them down.

“H-Hey! What are you talking about?”

“We’re talking about how we’re going to have sex. Our situation is unique, and that’s why we need to discuss things...”

“Don’t be so stuck-up. I know you want to get laid too.”

Yoshie and Fujiko both looked at her, annoyed.

“B-But that doesn’t mean...” Junko tried to come up with some kind of answer, but then she saw that Akuto was trying to sneak away, and yelled.

“...This is what happens when you can’t make a decision! We’re going to have a wedding for everybody! Anything that happens after that is fine!”

Both Fujiko and Yoshie’s expressions changed. Their mood shifted from “horny” to “romantic” in an instant.

“A marriage!”

“A wedding!”

“Wedding!”

“Wedding! Wedding!”

Everybody except Akuto began to run towards the living room. Akuto followed, wondering what they were doing. When he saw that the three of them were already picking out spots to hold the wedding, he sighed, shrugged, and went back to close the door to the bedroom.

Starting that evening, a strange, but somehow peaceful, life began.

During the day, he worked and studied to build what he called “The Pure Church”, and in the evening, the three of them were there to see to his needs. He knew them all very well, but actually living with them taught him some new things.

Yoshie was friendlier than he thought. She had a habit of pressing her body up against Fujiko and Junko too, not just him. She was also selfish and easily distracted. When she got excited about something she was working on on her computer in her room, she wouldn’t come out when anyone called her. And when Fujiko

tickled her neck to break her out of her concentration, she got seriously mad.

Fujiko was just like he thought, but once she'd opened up to someone, she had a habit of oversharing, and getting lazy. She would do the cooking, cleaning, and washing if she felt like it, but if she didn't, she'd just leave it to Junko. She also had a nasty habit of leaving half-eaten bags of potato chips and other snacks lying around. When you threw them out, she'd get mad, too, saying that she was planning on eating the rest of them. Akuto, however, was required to be perfect at all times. And since Akuto would try his best to be perfect when she demanded it, Yoshie and Junko were constantly getting mad at her.

Junko, for her part, let her clean freak flag show early. She complained that she was the only one who did any chores, but she was never satisfied if things weren't perfectly clean, and refused to even use maids or other cleaning services. Anything that needed doing, she'd do it herself before they could arrive.

She didn't like ordering out either. It was "unhealthy", she said. Instead, she would even go out and buy the ingredients herself. However, she seemed to have trouble opening up to others. Whenever Fujiko and Yoshie were getting a little too close to Akuto, she would try to pull them off. She would never, however, try to take their place. But even as she kept her distance from Akuto, she would be constantly staring at him (and sometimes panting), like some kind of indoor stalker. Of course, Fujiko didn't like this, and would try to bring them both to the bedroom, but Junko would always pitch a fit and run. Lately Fujiko had mostly given up.



Despite all these flaws, though, Akuto was very happy with his situation. Why? Because he could improve things over time, if he put his mind to it. He managed to spend more time with Junko without upsetting her by helping her with the chores. He managed to deal with Fujiko's laziness by giving her jobs to do outside of studying. And he managed to avoid any discussions of sex by having conversations with Yoshie late at night that the others couldn't follow.

Normally, doing all this would drain a man of energy, but Akuto could do it. Thanks to that, his days were peaceful. The marriage ceremony was a huge deal. They weren't sure what religious elements to incorporate, so they ended up using them all.

They rented out the whole event hall the day of the ceremony, and the three came in wearing their wedding dresses to the sound of a live band. The ceremony was only open to relatives and people they knew, but the seats were packed anyway. Everyone there was awestruck by the beauty of the brides.

The biggest moment was when it came time to kiss the brides. Yoshie's kiss was brief, and Fujiko's was passionate. But Junko hesitated when the moment came.

"You want me to do it in front of all these people?" she said. Fujiko just glared at her, and even Akuto felt like it was time she made up her damn mind.

In the end, it was Akuto's words that convinced her.

"I know it's your first kiss. And that's why I wanted you to have it at the best spot in the world."

When she heard that, Junko closed her eyes and quietly accepted his kiss.

The ceremony ended, and then it was time for the reception, and then by the time they got into their car and left, the sun was setting. There was no honeymoon, but by the time he got home that night, Akuto felt like he was on top of the world. Anything he wanted, he could have. Anything money could buy, he could get as much as he wanted. The weather was perfect.

The things he couldn't buy with money, the things the rich always wanted, like adventure and life, were already his.

Days of wine and roses.

He ate, drank, laughed, got mad, and loved.

For a young man like Akuto, the nights were the most thrilling.

The girls all drew lots to determine the order they'd be spending the night with him.

On the first night, Junko had covered her face with her hands. They'd both gotten into bed naked once, but that was when they were trying to recreate a novel in virtual phase space. It was a very strange situation, Akuto remembered.

"You were fiddling with a vase of roses with your fingers, weren't you?" Akuto said. Junko laughed and finally took her hands off her face. They both looked at each other and laughed, and then there was an awkward silence.

"Are we really doing this?" Junko asked.

"I want to," Akuto said.

She laughed, nervously, before pressing herself up against him. After that, there was no time for talking.

Junko got under Akuto, wrapping her limbs around his, and pressing so close that he couldn't see her face. Akuto wasn't quite sure what to do either. But when he felt her wetness and warmth down below, he wondered for a moment whether he should do something like he'd seen in porn. When he pushed his manhood up against her, she said nothing, so he tried to push deeper.

Junko twisted her body, sliding up the bed.

He didn't want to grab her, so he moved up with her.

His manhood touched her again, and there was a slick wet feeling that made him shiver.

Junko let out a strong, short breath, and twisted again. She slid up the bed, and Akuto followed her.

They did this in complete silence, again and again. It only came to an end when Junko hit her head up against the headboard.

"Oww..." she gasped in pain.

Akuto laughed. She chuckled too.

"I-It's not that I don't want to do it..." Junko said. She let go of Akuto's body and stretched out the sheets and comforter to where they'd been before she'd started squirming around. Akuto moved away from the headboard as well. They held each other again, and Junko let out a short gasp. Their parts touched, and Akuto was surprised at how cold they were as well.

"S-So this is how it works... I never really thought about it." Junko said, surprised at how wet they both were. Akuto nodded.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

This time she nodded back.

He pushed forward.

He could feel her around his whole manhood, but there was some resistance. Junko moaned softly, and wrapped her limbs tighter around him. When he stopped, though, she whispered.

“Go ahead.”

He held her head in his arms, and let the force of the legs wrapped around him push him inside. She thrust her head back, revealing her throat.



The theory behind time travel may have been complicated, but the execution wasn't. A switch was flipped to change the mode of the Brave Suit, and now, by just putting in some numbers and a location, he could go anywhere he liked. However, this was also proof that time travel had been done many times. In other words, what Boichiro said was likely true.

“You'll keep coming back here.”

—*No, you just screwed it up.*

Hiroshi chose for his first target the lab that Fujiko had found, the place where mana civilization was first developed. He had plenty of information about it, and knew exactly what year to go to. And he knew what data he had to destroy to put a stop to the research.

There was very little money available for mana research at the time, and even the slightest delay would've killed the project. He broke into the facility, wearing his Brave Suit. There were guards, but none of them had guns. He knocked them out, with his lasers set to minimum power.

He searched for the computers with the data he needed. In this era, anything that was put into a computer was also printed out and filed. He decided to just burn the whole room. There was nothing in the room that could explode. The fastest way to do this would be to throw the papers and computers into a pile and light the papers on fire.

Hiroshi threw all the papers into a big mountain and tossed the computers on top of them. He destroyed the fire alarm sensors with his molecular cutters, then used his lasers to start the fire. He waited to see if the computer's cases would melt. They did.

He had three more rooms to go.

But when he got to the last one, the police had arrived. Someone must have called them after noticing the fire, and they were carrying weapons.

—*Am I going to have to kill them?* he asked himself, suddenly uneasy. But he soon realized there was nothing to fear. The police had nothing but primitive revolvers, easily dealt with. He couldn't use a mana screen to block the bullets, but his auto-tracking lasers could.

The cops were scared. Fortunately for both sides, they decided not to resist further.

—*Whatever else I do, I don't want to kill anybody.* he said to himself.

But...

—*Wasn't I supposed to save humanity?* he thought, and shivered.

What he was doing now was a crime, even by his own standards. He was fighting a cop and burning computers and papers. There didn't seem to be that much difference between that and murder.

—*Boichiro must have killed people.*

A small sacrifice to save the many.

A simple calculation.

But in a story, actions like that were never treated as acceptable.

He'd wondered for a long time if this world might be somebody's story. But even if it was, no, precisely if it was, the simple answers had to be the right ones. That was how ethics worked.

Stories where the hero was forced to choose between his lover and the world were common, but those stories were wrong. They had to be. But if those were the stories people preferred, then what he was doing right now was something most normal people wouldn't accept.

He felt the cold chill of guilt run down his spine, and a deepening sense of loneliness. He finished his work in front of the police officer, and then used the Brave Suit to go back to his own time.



“This means there's two days when I don't get to be with you!”

Fujiko said, draping herself off of Akito as if the idea gave her physical pain.

“It’s just two days.”

“No, it’s two whole days!” she complained. She was lying on the bed, wearing the black underwear she’d bought especially for this day. Her eyes were shining as she spread her hands out toward Akuto. She was acting completely naturally, but Akuto knew that she’d practically interrogated Junko the other day.

“What was it like when he was holding you in his arms?”

“I’m sure it was very big, and powerful too.”

“How long did the pain last? ... No, my experience doesn’t matter. I’m asking because Akuto’s is special.”

She and Yoshie were trying their best to get the details out of her. Of course, Junko said nothing. And in the end, the two of them were practically resorting to torture. Naturally, Fujiko didn’t have any experience at all, herself. He, however, didn’t have much more.

With Junko they’d both been too awkward to do much of anything, but this time, it was different. Would he just be making things worse for Fujiko? He ran his hands down her body, and then said the first thing that came into his head.

“People have really different bodies, don’t they?”

“What...?” Fujiko gasped in protest. “D-Don’t talk about other girls at a time like this!”

“S-Sorry. You seem more... feminine... It feels like.”

In fact, she had a unique softness to her skin. It felt like his hand would sink into it forever. Junko’s body was lithe, and seemed to push back against him. It seemed to him like he should try touching the girls each in different ways.

Either she was happy that he’d said that, or happy that he’d shut up, because she didn’t say anything else. Akuto pressed himself up against Fujiko’s soft body. His upper body felt like it was sinking into water, or being painted with warm oil. He ran his hands down every part of her body, fondling, not just touching.

While he focused on the parts that made her moan the loudest, she began to run her hands down his body as well. Her fingers ran from his sides down to his hips. She grabbed him down there, and tried to move as if to lead him somewhere. When he adjusted his hips and pushed, he felt a sensation like he’d never felt before, like his skin was being covered in something soft and wet.

The two of them were both shaking with pleasure, but it was

Fujiko who moved first. With a provocative smile, she pushed her body against his from below.



He'd eliminated the root of mana civilization. But the past hadn't changed. No, the past had changed, in fact.

"The birth of mana civilization came at a different point?"

Hiroshi asked Boichiro, who was sitting in front of him.

"The data from the lab wasn't salvaged. A professor wasn't working that day, and he'd received the data via email. From there, he redeveloped it all by himself. Became a hero for it, in fact. That's the 'current' history."

Boichiro had the hint of a smirk on his lips. It seemed like the grin of a devil, yet also bore a hint of pity. Either way, it was a smile that said he'd seen this coming. This angered Hiroshi.

"Security was tight at that place. No way in hell did they just send all data to some random scientist!"

Boichiro shrugged.

"Yup. You're exactly right. But there's no way of knowing what, exactly, happened. That's how history works."

"You don't need to make it sound like a conspiracy. Like somebody made it all up."

"No, it was made up. Really."

"Really?" Hiroshi's eyes went wide at this surprising statement.

"Correct. Only those who were present for it know what happened in history. And we weren't there. Even if somebody just overwrote history entirely, we'd have no way to know."

"Then there's no way of knowing the truth about anything!" Hiroshi shouted.

"There is no such thing as truth. This whole world is a piece of fiction."

"Then what you told me about time before..."

"Correct. Change something somewhere, and something else is added to fix it. Things are changed. Someone changes them."

It was hard to believe. But since Hiroshi could go see for himself, there was no reason for Boichiro to lie. If that "someone" was the Law of Identity, she was being very cruel. Without her allowing the world to be changed, the world would be destroyed. If she didn't want that to happen, shouldn't she be helping Hiroshi?

As he thought about it, Hiroshi could feel his mood begin to blacken.

If I kill someone, then maybe...

Maybe changing something big, like that, would keep the Law of Identity from stopping him. He was reluctant to kill, but if this really was the afterlife — not that he had any proof of this — there was no problem.

The person he killed would just come here slightly sooner than planned. And if one death could change things...

“Thinking back, you never managed to kill anybody important, did you?” Hiroshi said, provocatively.

Boichiro understood what he was getting at, and his mouth twisted into a strange sort of smile. But the two of them said nothing more.



As for Yoshie’s part, she was nervous, but also curious, and curiosity won out. She would stare at Akuto’s body and touch it, especially enjoying the reaction of his manhood.

“It’s one thing to know about something, but it’s different to actually see it for yourself,” Yoshie said. She was wrapped in a towel that exposed nothing but her head and hands, playing with Akuto’s body as he sat naked on the bed.

“You’re not supposed to play with it like that...” Akuto complained.

“I need to know all about it, though,” Yoshie said calmly.

This left Akuto feeling somewhat annoyed.

“I guess we’ll both need to get to know each other’s bodies, then.” Akuto wrapped his hand around her back and grabbed the towel, pulling it off.

“Hyah!”

Her white skin was exposed, and she struggled to hide her body. Akuto pulled the towel, pulling her forward as well, and bringing her into his arms.

“I thought you were the type to not get upset about being naked.”

“This is a special occasion... You should understand that.”

Yoshie blushed, but Akuto was having none of it. He pulled the towel over them both and then pinned down Yoshie’s legs.

“It’s one thing to know about something, but it’s different to actually see it for yourself,” he said, as he moved his hand down below.

“I’m sorry. I apologize, so...” She struggled, but she was nowhere near as strong as Akuto.

“I’m just playing with the space between your toes.”

“You mean the space between my thumbs?”

“Sorry, it’s an old joke. But I’m kind of surprised that this is what it feels like.” Akuto laughed and then held her tight.

“You’re mean, you know that?”

“Mean? Well, they have told me that I’m the worst person in the world.”

He pressed inwards, without waiting for her. She let out a gasp of surprise, mixed with a very different feeling.



Hiroshi shot down the black mage that was carrying baby Akuto and fleeing from him.

When he saw that Akuto was dead, he averted his eyes from the baby that had been crushed from the fall.

3 - Many Possibilities That Are Now Lost

The days went by.

It was unclear how much time meant in the afterlife, but if you counted the seasons, it had been five years. Akuto and the girls should have gotten older, but their appearances hadn't changed.

Akuto probably wasn't going to age, given who he was, but the others seemed to be not maturing at all. All the students of Constant Magical Academy graduated and the school was shut down, but then it reopened as a community center. The teachers stayed on as staff, or got other jobs in public service.

The city itself grew, and there were subtle differences in people's relationships. But nothing really changed beyond that.

Because there were no new deaths.

And no aging.

And more than anything, there was no way to flee this world.

"I'm not going to feel well tomorrow if we do this... But um, it's not like I don't like it."

Junko said as Akuto got into bed. He'd lost count of how many times he'd slept with the three of them since then, but it wasn't always fresh and surprising. The first year one of them had been in his bed every night. With three of them, each of them had two days when they slept alone. So they were always willing, but by the second year they'd calmed down enough that some nights they just lay and talked.

"Have you ever actually not felt well? ...I mean, I'm asking strictly out of curiosity. Not that I really want to do it tonight," Akuto said.

He and Junko looked at each other.

"Well, no... No, I haven't. I do... put on weight, though," Junko said after a moment's thought.

"Some people think that the person you are today and the person you are tomorrow are different people."

"Yeah. That's right. But what does it mean if you don't change at all? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah. I know that scientifically, some percentage of my body will be new cells by tomorrow. But I don't know if that's how it works here. But our relationship has developed... and changed a little."

He leaned forward and gave her a kiss. Their tongues intertwined for a moment before he moved away.

Junko narrowed her eyes and spoke.

"I said we're not doing it today."

"...You've stopped blushing. Of course, I don't mind. But before you came here you wouldn't even let me kiss you," Akuto said. Junko's expression froze.

"Don't tell me... you've fallen out of love with me."

"Sorry if I scared you. If you love someone even more, that's still a change in your relationship. Anyway, our bodies don't change, but our feelings do." Akuto said with a serious look on his face. Junko nodded.

"That's true, but... Why are you saying something like that when you know it's going to spook me?"

"It's been bothering me more and more, lately. The true nature of this world."

"Stop it..." Junko said with an expression of fear on her face.

It was less a natural expression and more like something she wanted Akuto to see. Akuto knew this.

"I know, but I'm scared, too."

"Scared?"

"My life right now is like the definition of happiness. I have a fulfilling job. People appreciate me. I have people to love, and people who love me..."

"I'm never going to stop loving you," Junko said hurriedly, but Akuto shook his head.

"I know. That's not what I'm saying."

"You're scared that it might not last?"

"That's not it either. I'm scared that it will. We're not going to die. We're not going to fall out of love. Which means... we're finished," Akuto said, biting his lip as if he had trouble getting the words out.

"Finished?"

"We're not going to create anything new. I'm trying to reform those thugs, but the method I'm using is an old one, and it's almost weird how they never do anything I don't expect them to. In other

words, there's basically nothing left for me to do."

"But you said it was fulfilling..."

"Yeah. But to me, it's basically grunt work. I like the work, it doesn't bore me. But there's nothing new to be done."

"But what do you mean by finished? You're actually more scared of not dying, or something?"

"It's similar, but... Well, for example, if you had eternal life, and maybe we do, what would you do?"

Junko seemed confused by the question.

"I've never thought about it. But I know I'd be bored. Is that what you mean?"

"It's like boredom. But different. I've been thinking this whole time, because of the way I am, you see: Would I be bored with eternal life? But that wasn't it. What scares me is that everything's finished, but I have to keep going. To keep talking when there's nothing left to say. To keep writing when there's nothing left to write. It's the same with reforming those thugs. They'll eventually talk the way I tell them to. But it's just an echo of me. Love is like that. We're going to become one. Inseparable. But that's an ending. And even though it's an ending, I have to keep going."

Akuto began to ramble, like a dam had burst.

"Why do you keep going? What kind of question is that? If you just want to keep living your life, you can take it easy and relax. Or are you talking about doing something else? Akuto, you're not making sense."

Junko held his hand tightly, worried. Akuto looked her in the eyes.

"If we're characters in a story, our story is over. If we want to do anything more... even just live peacefully... we have to do something. And the reason we have to do something... in other words, the truth... we have to find it."

"So what? Why? No, for who?" Junko was almost starting to yell. But Akuto just quietly nodded.

"We have to find that out, too."

Junko said nothing, as if she'd given up. The next morning, when he woke up, Junko was already gone. When he went to the living room, Yoshie was gone too. Only Fujiko was languidly lying on the couch

"Looks like you had a good time last night," Fujiko said sarcastically.

“Quiet. You’re always more enthusiastic than she is...” Akuto cut her off, but Fujiko’s eyes took on a more serious intensity.

“I know. What were you fighting about?”

Akuto sat down next to her and explained. She leaned her head up against him.

“You’re still worried about saving the world?”

“To be honest, I’ve been kind of forgetting about all that. About Keena, Korone, and Hiroshi.”

He ran his fingers through her hair. Fujiko moved her head closer, like she had a thousand times before.

“It makes sense, if we’re so happy now.”

“My memories of them are fading, actually. As if we’re being trapped here in eternity.”

“Do you not like eternity?”

“I think that’s right. We’re inside eternity, and we need to find eternity’s meaning... and bring an end to the end.”

“It’s a little hard to understand, but I guess you’re right. So, why don’t we get started?”

“What?”

“Why don’t we start by touching each other, to figure out if this is a dream or real?”

Fujiko wrapped her hand around Akuto’s waist.

“Maybe doing that is what’s making us forget...”

Akuto stood up and went to leave. Fujiko was confused, but followed him, as he went up to the roof of their condo. From here, you could see the whole town.

“Is there some reason we’re looking at the town?” Fujiko asked. Akuto just shook his head.

“Nope. But I wanted to look off into the distance. As far as I could, you see,” Akuto said, and called up a mana screen.

It showed exactly what he was seeing.

“Your magical power is as strong as ever.”

“That’s one thing I don’t want to lose. Anyway, as long as there’s mana around, I can see forever.”

“But when we were alive, mana only existed inside imperial territory. And since the Earth was round, you couldn’t see beyond the horizon, or any further into space than a normal person.”

Akuto nodded and pointed into the distance.

“But here, the world is filled with mana. The whole world, not just the Empire.”

Akuto extended his view into the horizon, the same way you might zoom in a camera. What he saw was displayed on the screen so that Fujiko could see it too.

“Huh? This is pretty amazing.” Fujiko’s eyes went wide. The zoomed footage passed through the town, all the way to the horizon and beyond. It went beyond the horizon, in other words, into the sky. The sky filled the screen, turned into a pure blue. It turned white for a moment as it went through the clouds, and then got darker and darker. His vision passed into space before finally disappearing.

“It disappeared?” Fujiko whispered. But in the next moment, the footage showed darkness again. This time, she saw what she’d seen before, but in reverse. The earth came into view and grew in size, and then...

“Our backs?!”

Just as she said, the screen was showing Akuto and Fujiko’s backs. If it was showing what Akuto was seeing, then...

“This is us, right now, isn’t it?”

Fujiko waved her right hand. She could see her arm move in the video as well.

“Yup. You’re seeing what I’m seeing right now. I noticed this a while ago.” Akuto moved his left arm.

“What does this mean?”

“If the world we lived on in life was fictional, so is this one. So I was thinking, what’s the difference?” he said. “And the difference is whether there’s a wall between us and the outside. When we were alive, we lived in a world with a wall. And now, there’s no wall here. No matter what direction you go in three dimensional space, you come back to where you started. You can go forever, but it’s finite.”

“I understand that. But what does that mean?” Fujiko asked.

“I don’t know,” Akuto said, shaking his head. “But what I can say right now is that even if this is fictional, there are fictions with an outside and fictions with only an inside. And the latter has a main character, and background characters. Whatever we do will succeed, as long as we do it here.” He winked at her.

Fujiko blushed, and raised the corner of her lips into a smile.

“You noticed, didn’t you? That I’m still planning on conquering the world.”

“You and I are a better pair than other people think. Even if the

other two don't know what you're thinking, I do. And you're very close to creating a political structure with me at its center, aren't you?"

"That's correct. So, what will you do? Sit on a throne, or live a life of luxury forever? Do whatever pleases you."

"And you know that I'm not going to do anything. I was just being silly. The most fun thing you can do with money is completely waste it." Akuto laughed.

"Oh my. I'm happy that you understand me so well, but it frustrates me that you've already thought so far ahead." Fujiko laughed, as well.

"I'll do something even bigger, then. Why don't I crush the entire world in the palm of my hand?"

"Huh?"

Akuto spoke in a completely calm voice. Fujiko wasn't sure if he was joking.

"This finite world is filled with mana. That's how it's set up. Which means..."

Akuto casually reached out a hand, and began to clench it into a fist.

The world began to shake.

"Aaah!" Fujiko let out a gasp of surprise. The whole city was shaking. The air vibrated and roared from the pressure. The earth was shaking, as well. There wasn't supposed to be any mana in the ground, but if this whole world was filled with mana, it would be present there as well. The whole of space itself was practically within the palm of Akuto's hand.



Fujiko realized that he was about to crush the planet.

“Akuto...” She called his name softly, fearfully.

This was suicide. If you destroyed space itself in a world where you couldn’t die, would everything turn to nothing? The look on Akuto’s face seemed to say to her that he was ready to find out. He was just quietly and calmly closing his fist.

Fujiko grabbed his open hand. The ground swelled up like it was being sucked up into the air. The seas surged into the city like a tidal wave. Buildings shattered and people began to float up to the sky. The whole Earth was under tremendous pressure, like it had suddenly been submerged miles below the sea. It was an end to the world that no one had ever anticipated.

Fujiko clung to Akuto, and just as he pulled her close, there was static on the mana screen. The buzz of a TV tuned to static. And then words followed.

“Nope! I’m not lettin’ you end the world like that!”

The voice had a strange accent. It was a voice she recognized. She looked down at the mana screen. It was Keana, the girl with blonde hair.

“Keana,” Akuto whispered.

She was the other Keana, the one who had appeared when the Law of Identity had reset the world. Akuto and his friends had called her Keana, and spent a lot of time trying to erase her from existence. She wasn’t even supposed to exist.

“Why?”

Akuto stopped what he was doing, surprised at this turn of events.

“I won’t let you end the world like this!” Keana said again. “I disappeared because I was satisfied! But you guys aren’t really satisfied!”

Akuto stopped moving entirely. He moved to answer Keana. But then the mana screen disappeared.

“A hallucination? No, that’s impossible...” Fujiko said. When she saw Akuto’s reaction, she knew it was no hallucination. He’d relaxed his hand. The world stopped shaking, and began to return to normal. No one around them seemed to have noticed the astonishing thing that had just happened. They were all walking about the city, as if the worldwide destruction had never happened.

“We’re not really satisfied...?” Fujiko looked at Akuto. He

glanced back at her, and then looked down.

"I guess so. We knew that from the start. But we'd thought that maybe, just maybe, we were wrong, and you were satisfied."

Fujiko gave him a kiss, and left the rooftop and headed down the stairs. He looked into the sky, before heading to the door. As he did, Yoshie came up, and looked at him with disappointed eyes.

"I'm a girl too, you know. It's frustrating. I detected what you were doing and came to see, and then I found this."

"I'm sorry."

"Apologizing just... I don't know. Makes it worse. But there's something you want me to think about, right?" She sighed and shrugged.

"Yeah. I want you to think of a way for us to get out." Akuto looked straight into her eyes.

"It's going to take time. Let's go to my room and talk." She motioned for him to come back inside.



Brave was utterly defeated.

Up until the 25th time, he'd been counting. But after the 25th time he killed Akuto, he stopped. Nothing had changed.

Nothing had changed.

At some point, Boichiro had stopped trying to hide his pity. Brave could tell he was sympathizing with the boy who was doing the same thing he'd once done.

"You should give it up. You understand now, right?"

"I definitely understand that somebody is trying to stop history from changing."

Brave had totally lost his composure by now.

"That's right. For some reason, they refuse to allow the flow of history to change."

"But I'm part of history, too, aren't I?"

"Yeah. I guess your role in the historical record is to struggle, and to fail," Boichiro said with a sigh. "I realized after I died, that my death had been decided from the start."

"Then am I going to keep suffering? Just like you? Am I going to keep doing this until I just break? Am I just going to keep murdering, for nothing?"

Brave already knew the answer. Boichiro nodded.

“That’s your role, yes.”

“MY role? Then am I playing a part in someone else’s script? Why?”

“In this world... No, that’s not the right way to say it. In any world, free will is an illusion. You’re doing what you’re doing because you have a result that you want to achieve. But that’s because you’re thinking along the lines of a story. If you want happiness, all you need is a full stomach and a member of the opposite sex by your side. Even if they die, your sense of loss won’t last too long. There’s no need you have that someone else can’t fulfill. If they’re hungry, even the most discriminating diner will eat what’s in front of them. There’s no difference between biological satisfaction and happiness. Or at least there wouldn’t be, if it weren’t for stories. Love. Bloodlines. Success. Life paths. All values of these are religions in their own right, distinct from biological value. Stories are what make sentience possible. But they also infect it. Like a virus.”

“But we were able to resist! We realized that, and we’re already trying to destroy natural stories. We know that the history that lead us here is an unnatural one. The fact that the characters in the story know it’s a story is destabilizing it!”

Brave’s eyes were shining with this new discovery. But Boichiro’s expression remained unchanged.

“That’s the kind of story this was.”

“What?”

“A story that’s revealed to be a story. The *deus ex machina* that appears at just the right moment isn’t there for the sake of catharsis. It has appeared to tell us what it is that we were thinking is a story, and tell us that is fictional. What that god tells us is the pleasure of a story, and its limits. And now, we’ve become the *deus ex machina*. We ourselves have become the god.” Boichiro pointed to himself, and then back to Brave.

“We ourselves are the *deus ex machina*?”

“Changing history can fix any problem. Even the most horrible deaths, or the biggest failures.”

“In other words, *deus ex machina* aren’t forbidden. They just fail?”

“That’s right. Which leads to only one answer.”

“I get it. We’re not the main characters.” The last light of hope faded from Brave’s eyes.

"That's right." Boichiro kicked the ground, annoyed. "And your role isn't over yet, either. You can tell because your name is now just 'Brave'. And you haven't lost the title of Brave, either. All you're going to be allowed to do now, probably, is display the courage that exists after all is lost."

"And even then, I'm still just a side character. So who's the main character?" Brave asked, even though he knew the answer.

"Of course, the man who's revealed that the story is nothing but layer upon layer of fiction will be the one to end the story about stories. The Demon King destroys the world, right? Whenever there's a story that won't let the prince marry the princess and live happily ever after... It always ends with the end of the world."



"So I'm important, then?" Akuto asked. He still couldn't believe it.

"I think so, at least," Yoshie said with a serious expression.

"You're going to end the world. That's how this works. As for what exactly that means... it's complicated."

"But I'm the one who has to end it?" Akuto asked. Yoshie nodded.

"Keana disappeared because she was satisfied. You need to be satisfied, too."

"I understand that. But what would satisfy me?"

"You hated fiction, while living inside a fiction. You had a fetish for revealing that which was fictional, and kept doing it again and again. You would destroy what seemed to be a closed system, only to activate the system that lay beyond it. A multilayered fiction. An infinite regression. It's a hell that continues forever. Which makes this... difficult."

She'd sat Akuto down in a chair, and was leaning forward against his back.

"By the way..."

"What? We're talking about something important."

"It is important. That's why I'm asking. Why are you pressing up against me like that?"

"I'm enjoying my reward for being a side character, for playing the role of one of the three goddesses."

"We're not talking about anything romantic or sexy at all."

“Doesn’t it seem like something a villain would do? Stroking a girl while having a normal conversation.”

“Am I still a villain?” He tickled her cheek with his finger, and she smiled happily.

“Hehe... If you’re not going to be a villain during what comes next, what are you going to be?”

“But what, exactly, am I going to do? Satisfy myself?”

“You’re going to end the world... But like I said, that’s complicated. First, I need to explain what this world is. The afterlife acts as if it was made just for us. It responds to our will, or your will, mostly. Which means that this world can take any form you want it to.”

“That, I understand.”

“No, you don’t, really. You don’t know what that really means. There’s a concept called ‘possible worlds’.”

“Possible worlds?” Akuto “remembered” a word that he’d never known by scanning the data loaded into his mind.

“I see. A thought experiment that says in a world where anything can happen, given enough time, any given thing will happen.”

“Correct. Anything that can be put into writing can happen here. Which means that nothing will happen that can’t be expressed in words.”

Yoshie began to explain the concept of possible worlds, which was difficult to understand just from the database.

For example, “An elephant flies” or “Hitler appears in Paris in the year 2000” are both physically impossible, but perfectly grammatical sentences. If an elephant had wings, or if Hitler was still alive, they could quite easily happen. If you accept that these worlds are possible, you realize that the world is filled with endless possibilities, which can be thought of as simultaneously existing parallel worlds.

“You’re going to make every possible theoretical world,” Yoshie said, as if ordering him.

“Every one of them, huh?”

It was a staggering concept to think about.

“Whatever is left at the end is what you want. View every possible world, and then choose the one you want.”

“You’re right... In a world where I can do anything I want... I can look for a possibility that will save the world. It may be the

only way out of here.”

“I think you should get to work right away, then.” Yoshie pulled up a mana screen and displayed the entirety of history so far as a model.

“The data you have access to is a copy of the world at the moment of its destruction. As long as that copy exists, you can use it to go back and calculate out any possibility you like.”

“But it feels like a world which was created that way would be pretty sloppy and inaccurate,” Akuto complained.

“That’s fine. Even a sloppy and inaccurate possibility is still a possibility,” Yoshie replied.

And so Akuto resolved to find the possibilities within himself.



The world was howling.

Only a few noticed it, but of course, that few included Brave and Boichiro.

“What’s going on?” Brave asked. But he instinctively knew the answer: the world itself was losing its shape.

“This is the moment the world is reconstructed. Each time you changed the past, I was able to sense a smaller version of this. I don’t think anyone else did, though,” Boichiro explained.

“Which means the change...”

“Of course. It was caused by the Demon King. Boot up your suit. We’re leaving.”

“Leaving?” Brave asked, but as he did, he activated the suit’s time travel device. He adjusted the settings so that when he jumped, Boichiro would jump with him.

“We’re going to disappear from this space. In this moment, the Demon King is in complete control of the afterlife. We’re going to make it so we’re not a part of that.”

“You can tell me the details later.” Brave jumped to a time he’d never gone to before.

He wanted to avoid any human contact, so he’d chosen the summit of a high mountain in a time where there was no magical, or even electrical civilization.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to go anywhere cold, so I chose a place 2000 meters above sea level, in the middle of summer.”

They were surrounded by rocky mountaintops, with a forest

below and nothing else for miles. Snow could be seen on the peaks above them, but the sun was shining here, and it was actually hot.

"Thanks. The weather might be better than the afterlife here. The chill from this wind is actually rather pleasant." Boichiro sat down on a nearby rock.

"So, the Demon King changed the whole afterlife?" Brave asked, putting a hand on his hip.

"It's always getting changed. This time, however, he erased it."

"Erased it? You mean he reset it and did it over?"

"That's right. The afterlife is completely within his control. One of the people around him must have told him that," Boichiro said, looking a little troubled.

"Completely? I thought that was a place where everyone's wishes came true, and the Demon King just had the strongest will of all of them."

Brave frowned. There must have been dead people there before the Demon King arrived.

"No. There's a chance that even the memories of the dead within the afterlife were only created after the Demon King arrived. Not that there's any way for them to realize that."

Brave nodded at this explanation, but his expression remained unchanged.

"You're talking about that thought experiment that says that even if the world was created five minutes ago, if your memories were created then too, you could never tell. I've heard of that. But if that's true... no, was always true, I guess... then what are we?"

"The obvious question. But answering it is difficult. We're on the inside of whatever's going on, after all. But if I were to venture a guess anyway, if the whole universe was created by the Law of Identity, then everyone, including us and the Demon King, are fictional."

Boichiro began to choose his words carefully.

"That's what you were saying before."

"The afterlife is within the boundaries of her creation as well. And we can assume that it's within the domain of the Demon King, too."

Brave nodded again.

"I see. Everyone died and was reborn... But at the hands of the Demon King."

"Correct. The entire world was reconstructed in digital form.

Just like the computer gods once tried to do.”

“So why delete it and start over? He’s practically a god. How is he not satisfied with the world he created?”

“We can guess at that from the statements he made. Because it was a world that had ended, but would continue for eternity,” Boichiro said. “I know the feeling.”

“I don’t,” Brave complained. The frown was still on his face.

“He realized that there’s no story to him fulfilling his desires.”

“I figured that out first. Otherwise I would’ve lived here in this world with my girlfriend.”

“We can’t do that. Just because of who we are,” Boichiro said. For the first time Brave’s expression changed.

“Who we are? That’s what you were explaining, wasn’t it?”

“If the people in the afterlife are fictional characters, we’re real people. We, the Demon King, and nobody else.”

“Just us and the Demon King?” Brave asked, startled.

“We may have been chosen by the Law of Identity. Of course, we’re side characters. But we still have an important role to play.”

Boichiro’s face seemed strangely relaxed.

“Sure, I feel something here that you might call fate. We weren’t caught up in what the Demon King just did, after all.”

“The Demon King is going to start the story over and over again, and see what he can learn. Using the people who went to the afterlife as characters.” There was no doubt in Boichiro’s voice.

Brave agreed.

“But it won’t work.”

“That’s right. Something that didn’t work the first time won’t work the second, unless someone else is there to help.”

“And that’s our job?” Brave continued. There was a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Boichiro nodded.

“You’ve already made your choice, right? It’s always the hero that saves the world.”

“How?”

“There is a way. We go back inside the Demon King’s world. No, we go inside, but we interfere with it without being caught up in it. We can move upon the line of history drawn by the Law of Identity. Of course, there will be sacrifices, though.”

“Sacrifices?”

“We’re the ones who intervene in the Demon King’s world. Not

our individual personalities.”

Boichiro spoke with a strange sort of resolve. There was something in his voice that made Brave uneasy.

“What do you mean by ‘sacrifices’?”

“Neither the Demon King nor the Law of Identity treat people as complete personalities. They each have their own inner world... but in the face of the story, people’s inner personalities are meaningless. That’s going to be true even after the world is reconstructed.”

“I see...” Brave said, and sighed.

“We’ll be treated as a personality that has been reconstructed to serve as the hero.”

“That’s right. Probably because that’s how the Law of Identity wants it. That’s what it means to be a character.”

“I don’t want that to happen to me,” Brave said. But Boichiro was no longer in front of him. He could feel memories, a mind, and knowledge flooding into him, and he closed his eyes to examine each in turn. He kept breathing softly, and then looked up at the sky.

“I understand. We need to show something to the Law of Identity.”

4 - Infinite Universes

Maybe opening up all the possibilities was a mistake. Space is finite. Characters are finite. But their combinations are infinite. Opening up a possibility meant breaking down the walls of the worlds within Akuto that might have been.

It was the equivalent of giving birth to a new universe within himself. Of course, the tools for this universe weren't limited to what was inside Akuto. The gods of the outer universe, even they became a part of the story. As a result, the story became chaos.

What does it mean when a story turns into chaos? You can find the answer within one of our oldest stories: "The Tower of Babel."

Until then, you could say that humanity shared a story. Everyone, essentially, was playing their own role in the story. That's why the world refused to allow anybody but Akuto to alter it.

But what happens if a story ceases to be shared?

The answer is: chaos.

The gods of the outer universe were, you could say, their own main characters, with their own main stories. So multiple protagonists tried to advance their own stories within the same place. It may have been chaos, but there was no conflict.

The reason for this was that it wasn't just strong stories that were trying to take control, but even weak stories were included in this as well. The frustrating thing was that the strength of a story had nothing to do with its size.

Weak, huge things drove daily life.

Strong, small things drove the abnormal events.

Those stories that explained the birth of the world and made humanity realize its shared nature were large in scope, but some of them dissolved unnoticed into the bustle of daily life. Stories of individuals were carved irreparably into the mind, but of course, they applied to nothing more than individuals.

Individuals.

This was the first time that humanity became "individual".

With shared words, but no shared stories, no relationships could be born. It was impossible for someone to be an enemy or a friend, of course, but they couldn't be a stranger either. Infinite

possibilities made stories impotent.

Infinite loneliness.

First-Person Pronouns.

But still, I begin the story, no, what comes before it.

Sleeping in the darkness. No, rolling.

Being thrown. Doing nothing.

I hear a voice.

Fast. No, near.

I don't understand. Is the voice calling someone? Calling me? Or someone else? No way to know. Maybe it is my voice.

As long as the voice continues, I may be able to understand that time exists. But there are no units. It is continual, eternal. No guarantee that the same word isn't being repeated. Count an eternally ringing bell, and you'll have no words to describe a single toll.

How many times? Counted how? From which eternity?

I hypothesize that the voice is my own. It's still not a story.

There's not even loneliness. Because I am a first person pronoun.

I speak. Sound.

I speak to speak.

I speak. Words.

Can't find the right answer. No meaning. Not even a wrong answer. Meaningless.

A misspoken word. A mistake.

Everything, nothing.

I move my body.

Move.

Outside and inside.

Barely separated.

Move.

Which way? Is space outside? Or inside? Go inside, and find nothing. Go outside, and find nothing.

Separation.

Count an eternally ringing bell, and you'll have no words to describe a single toll.

How many times? Counted how? From which eternity?

I count anyway.

Split. I split more and more.

Split the heavens and earth.

I move.

I can move.
I can move upon the Earth.
Stand. With bones. With muscles of the spine inside.
Hurt.
Not everything. The inside. No pain outside.
Howl. Meaningless.
A misspoken word. A mistake.
All that there is.
Only the misspoken words dwell in the voice.
Only the mistakes dwell in the inside.
Only pain is there.
Not there. Can't be sure.
Only mistakes.
I mistake.
I make better mistakes.
I mistake, somehow.
I mistake with a strong will.
I mistake again and again.
And beyond that. Nothing.
I see.
I see mistakenly.
I see mistakenly, better.
I see mistakenly, somehow.
I see mistakenly with a strong will.
I see mistakenly again and again.
There was a mistake, there.
I see.
You. A second person pronoun.
Standing in the light. No, standing there lost, in the light.
There. Doing nothing.
I hear a voice. Far. Calling out.
To me? Or to someone else?
I split more and more.
Me and others. Here and there.
I hypothesize that the voice is there.
It may be a story. It may be loneliness.
Because it may not have been spoken to me.
Because it is a second person pronoun.
I speak. Sound.
I speak to speak.

I speak. Language.
I can't find the right answer.
There is meaning.
There is also misspeaking.
Howling.
Meaning.
Misspeaking.
Failure.
That is all that there is.
Only the misspoken words dwell in the voice.
The mistakes are everywhere.
The pain is there.
Only mistakes.
I mistake.
I make better mistakes.
I mistake, somehow.
I mistake with a strong will.
I mistake again and again.
And beyond that. There is a story.
Thus, reality became reality.

To recognize reality, stories are needed. And this is because relationships with others are born here. But recreating all those possible stories took Akuto what amounted to an infinite span of time. Because, of course, he needed to test every story. But even so, the stories instantly became more complicated.

As soon as the modern era arrived, they became exponentially more complex, because the machines and cities themselves became elements in the story. But what made things particularly difficult here were the elements brought in by the gods of outer space. Things that the Law of Identity lacked were there.

Akuto tried conflict with the outer gods several times. Sometimes he won. In the academy in another world, a story was born where Akuto, bossed around by Fujiko, helped her with her plan for world conquest. There, Fujiko's world conquest never ended, and the story ended without Akuto and Fujiko even kissing.

The test of that possibility ended.

Sometimes, the outer gods won.

February 23rd, 1945. Dresden.

Akuto was there.

The allies launched a completely meaningless bombing raid, and

both he and Junko were caught up in a terrible explosion. Akuto was badly injured, and could only watch as Junko died in front of him. After that, he stood in the city as a wounded veteran, living off donations, until he died from malnutrition. That possibility ended there.

Akuto was born with the strange power to see ghosts. Using that power, he solved complex mysteries with the help of Korone, a ghost.

Hundreds of thousands of stories were tested, and all of them discarded.

July, 1950. Korea.

People belonging to the Bodo league were gathered from nearby villages in an old cobalt mine that the Japanese army had run during its occupation, and massacred. They were suspected of being communists. However, the Bodo League was created to re-educate communists.

And what was worse, in an effort to increase its numbers, the league had begun offering employment to anyone who joined it, which meant that most of its members had no idea what communism was. There were barely any communists there who would sympathize with North Korea. The cobalt mine had been chosen because it would make it easy to bury the bodies.

Akuto was killed there. He'd been a member of the league. What shocked him, just before his death, was that the Korean police who killed him didn't even know what communism was.

Yoshie was reborn in another world, carrying her memories of her previous life. This other world was medieval, and she used the power of science to do great deeds there. This story was easily ended when he realized that the ending wouldn't be a story. He couldn't be sure that it wouldn't end with the modern world being proven superior to the medieval one.

Junko ran away from home. She'd always been a wild child, so her parents didn't go to the police. She was walking down the street at night when she was kidnapped by a band of thugs. When she told them her story, they realized that no one would look for her. So they drugged her, raped her, and dumped her in the mountains. They'd given her enough drugs to cause an overdose, and she died in the mountains. Her body was found, but her killers never were.

Akuto was an ordinary boy who was visited by a ninja. The ninja's name was Junko. She was a beautiful girl, but had grown up

in the countryside with no knowledge of the modern world. She causes chaos in Akuto's peaceful town. Countless variations of this story were tried, but it ultimately became clear that it would never see a real ending. Thus, it was abandoned.

Fujiko was born to wealthy parents. Her parents, however, were gaudy socialites who disliked having to care for a child. Despite the fact that they had the money to hire nannies, though, they held the odd belief that it was a parent's responsibility to care for a child themselves. Fujiko was, of course, abused almost from the moment she was born. With no one to rely upon but her parents, and no concept that a higher power like god, might exist, she worshipped the parents that abused her, and only made them hate her more, and fear her.

The murder was done by her father. He spun her around by the leg, slamming her into a wall and splitting her skull. She died. The family doctor was well-paid to keep this quiet. A year later they'd forgotten she'd existed.

Akuto awoke to psychic powers in a world where only girls could be psychics. He became the one male student at an all-girls psychic training school...

That was where Akuto gave up making stories. It had all started to seem pointless. The stories were all developing, but everything he made felt so... stupid. The only thing he seemed to want was a world where he could feel peace and comfort forever.

Perhaps in a way, that was the final form of a story. If he focused his attention on times that were hard, he could even make a story where he did nothing more than eat a full belly of food. And in any era, it was possible to find happiness by interacting with people.

On the other hand, the stories where the outer gods intervened involved the things he wanted being destroyed. They would also hide the fact that they were stories, and make it seem as if, instead, they were reality.

This, too, was another form of story concluding.

It had taken thousands of years to reach this point, and still stories hid themselves from mankind, he now believed. This belief had started as a doubt, and had only grown stronger. To make the stories flat, Akuto prepared an infinite plane, with a chair and table on it, drinks, and a few fruits. Even here, stories still emerged, but they could be kept under control.

People can only recognize reality through stories. And he was searching for the end of stories. This meant he was looking for the end of reality. For an end to time.

The stories started to fight back, as if they were trying to survive even past humanity's demise.

An infinite flat plane. Akuto summoned a visitor into that space. There were very few personalities outside his influence now. And only one who could give him advice.

Hiroshi was there, with a blushing smile on his face.

"It's our first time talking like this, isn't it?" Hiroshi said. He wasn't wearing the suit, but he was still Brave.

"We've spent a lot of time apart, haven't we?"

"I never thought about trying to talk with you as an equal."

"Maybe not. But I think we knew that this time would come."

"I didn't come here because you called me. I chose this spacetime to warp to. I knew this time would come. So for me it's been a few months. For you, a few thousand years? That's a long time."

"Sorry I couldn't find a better place to invite you." Akuto laughed as he offered a drink.

"This place is... an endless flat plane. Like a desert, I guess." Hiroshi looked around.

"Of course, I can make it look like anything I want. But I'm trying to keep stories from emerging."

"This is your world, then."

"I guess so. What do you want to drink? I haven't decided what this is yet," Akuto said casually. When Hiroshi looked in the cup, there was what he could only describe as a liquid that hadn't become anything yet.

"I'll take water. Natural mineral water," Hiroshi said. The liquid bubbled and became cold mineral water.

"I see." Hiroshi swallowed the water. It felt pleasant and cool as it went down his throat.

"What's it like being able to do anything?" Hiroshi asked after a moment.

"It feels like I've reached the endpoint of the pleasure I can experience as a living thing," Akuto said. Hiroshi laughed a little.

"I've never felt that before."

"Right?" Akuto smiled. "But right now we're on the same stage. I think we're the only ones who haven't become concepts."

“Concepts?”

“In this state, I can really understand the fact that a personality is something that can’t be truly understood by another person. If another person’s responses were actually mechanical, we wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. Perhaps the infinite personalities that exist inside us right now are actually that.”

“If you have a box that only an individual can look inside, and something with the same name but different is put inside it, can you have a conversation? If you have a dictionary in a foreign language that you don’t know, and it tells you how to respond to different greetings, if you use it are you having a conversation?” Hiroshi asked.

Akuto seemed entertained.

“Yeah. What you just said doesn’t seem like something you’d say.”

“When I’m here, I’m a unified version of the concept of Brave.”

Hiroshi grinned too.

“I see. So concepts really are concepts then.”

“But I do understand what you’re trying to say. You and I are the only incarnate beings in the Law of Identity’s world. We can call being a concept that is equal before its creator being incarnate, right? So in your world, all the people inside are equally incarnate.”

“You use the word creator, but it doesn’t feel like I’m a god. I can feel it. Stories are what are tying us down. Even if we were to attempt to create a world, the only freedom we’d have is what story we would choose. In the end, what I’m trying to do is kill that and escape from this world.”

Akuto’s voice seemed to echo a sense of loneliness.

“So you’ve reconfirmed that your goal is to kill stories.”

“I guess so. When I made the decision, I didn’t think much of it. Ever since I decided to kill the gods,” Akuto said with an exasperated sigh. Hiroshi chuckled.

“Show some consideration for those of us who got caught up in it. If you include the stories you created after that, we’ve lived countless ordinary lives, and countless extraordinary ones. And Korone and Keena are still asleep. I think they could probably endure a few thousand years of that, though.” Despite Hiroshi’s words, there was no harshness behind his criticism.

“That’s why I decided to talk to you. You’re the only one that’s outside my story,” Akuto said, his voice suddenly serious.

"I don't mind when you sound weak like that. After all, we weren't very well balanced. I was much lighter than you were," Hiroshi said, jokingly.

The two of them both laughed, a little embarrassed.

"That's right. You were always the saner of the two of us. You were normal, so you were never cut out to be caught up in something like this."

Hiroshi shook his head confidently, however.

"That's not true anymore. That's why I can end this story."

Nothing on Akuto's face said he believed this, though.

"You mean your decision to kill me, right?"

But Hiroshi was unphased.

"Of course. With you gone, I can rewind the world and restart the story, with all its patterns. You can be there, just not as the demon king."

"Isn't that a waste of time? You've already killed me a bunch of times, haven't you?" Akuto asked, confused. Hiroshi pointed at him, as if to say, "That's exactly the point!"

"That's the problem! In this world... yes... even in your world... everybody wants to kill the demon king. Of course, so do you. But it doesn't work because the Law of Identity's power is still in effect here!"

For the first time, Akuto seemed like he'd figured something out.

"That's right. It was Keana who stopped me from destroying the world."

"So first I'll kill the Law of Identity, and then I'll kill the demon king. That will solve it." Hiroshi had a mischievous grin on his face. Akuto sighed and pouted.

"You know that's impossible."

"Right now, I'm basically fused with Boichiro. Not only do I have his knowledge, I have his sarcastic personality as well. I've lived a whole life without value. As a side character."

Hiroshi reached out toward one of the fruits on the table. Only then did he realize that it was a peach.

"Well, I feel bad for what I did to you. But I don't think it was devoid of value... No, I actually suppose I consider my own life devoid of value now."

Akuto picked up a peach. He took out a knife and made a cut on the peach, then ran his finger down it and the peel came off.

“That’s why I can’t come up with a good solution for this problem. In the end, maybe there isn’t anything I can do. It feels like I called you here to just destroy everything.”

Akuto’s face darkened, but Hiroshi just laughed.

“Haha. I’ll stop being mean to you now.”

“Mean?” Akuto looked into Hiroshi’s eyes.

“I mean, I think there’s more you can do. I’ve got an idea, you could say.”

Hiroshi cut into the flesh of his peach with a knife, and took a big bite out of it.

“Is there? Really?” Akuto asked. Hiroshi’s response was immediate.

“If you feel bad, it means you feel some degree of responsibility. The people within you are pawns, but you don’t think of them as pawns.”

Akuto gasped.

“I see. I’ve got a responsibility not just towards you, but to the ghosts who were once personalities too, don’t I? When it comes down to it, I’m the king of the ghosts.” He nibbled his peach in contemplation. “Humanity went extinct, and everyone became data, you could say. But even in the past, people’s actions were digitized.”

“If you became digitized, boss, it means you had a real soul. That’s something Boichiro told me.”

“A real soul? In other words, something that makes me what I am. That was the concept that took root in Zero. And also the meaning of the Law of Identity.”

“Correct. It can’t be called anything but a ‘concept’, but we still need to treat it as something real. We need to assume that anything under the Law of Identity’s influence has a soul.”

“I see. So if we assume that a soul is real, that means there’s a difference between ghosts and data. The black mages always did say that necromancy was an incomplete field.”

“And that’s why you can summon ghosts.”

“Ghosts, huh?” Akuto mused, “And if I can do that, I can figure out what my mistake is, and maybe understand the nature of this world, huh?”

Akuto tossed the peach he’d been eating into the air. When it landed, a long table appeared. There were four chairs there. Before long, someone appeared from beyond the horizon. The image of

them seemed to be wavering like a mirage, but as they approached, they became clearer and more distinct. It was a young girl.

Perhaps he hadn't expected to see her, or perhaps Boichiro's memories held some degree of influence over him, because Hiroshi gasped in surprise.

"Eiko Teruya!"

A slim, well-proportioned body, with long hair tied behind her back. It was indeed the girl who'd once used a complicated conspiracy to get Akuto to agree to her deal.

"My memories are an absolute mess," she said, complaining to Akuto as if it had only happened yesterday. She pushed her way past Hiroshi, casting a pridefully indignant expression toward Akuto.

"I understand. You lived in a prison. But if you grow used to introspection, there's no place easier to live in than a prison. Anyway, sit down. I prepared a table and chairs so we could have a long chat." Akuto spoke gently to the new arrival.

"Hah! You're a nasty one, aren't you? Fine, I will. I'm going to hate you so much that you'll eventually go crazy from it."

She went around to the other side of the table, before sitting down in the middle chair and crossing her long legs, as if to show them off. Her underwear was showing, but that seemed entirely deliberate.

"Well, I was never able to come to like you, you know," Akuto began.

Eiko snorted.

"Sometimes things between men and women don't go well regardless of whether you like somebody or not. You've lived thousands of years, and yet you're still just a child, Akuto Sai."

"You're not even 20 yet," Hiroshi interrupted. Eiko gave him a scathing glare.

"Age isn't everything. Before, you seemed like the adult to me."

"When I was trying to find the Law of Identity, you betrayed me."

Eiko just grinned.

"We're not all here to talk about what a bitch I am, are we? And anyway, I did what was right."

"Right?" Akuto raised an eyebrow. "How were you right? All you did was do what the computer gods told you, and try to raise your status in the real world."

Eiko smiled.

"I don't think that's wrong. Whether the world ended up destroyed or not, that would happen long after my generation. Have fun while you're alive, and leave a good society for the next generation. If the end of the world only comes a long time after that, what else can you do? You and I, or maybe Boichiro and I, depending on who I'm talking to, could've gone to the future together."

"You tried to take control of society, didn't you? By altering the gods' data to deceive people."

"And what's wrong with that? You're so arrogant. Here, you're trying people as a collective. The citizenry. The masses. The people. The mob. The crowd. It doesn't matter what word you use. They've all sunk into the background, if nothing else. You should've figured this out after the end of the world. You did something stupid to try and control people. You tried to give them a religion."

Akuto fell silent.

"You and I are the same. Maybe I didn't know the truth about what was coming in the distant future, but if you had infinite time, you would've done the same thing I did."

"That's right. It's the same thing." Akuto was practically choking on the admission.

"Just like you, I didn't believe in religion. Just like you, I looked down on people who acted without thinking. But the reason you didn't come with me was that at your core, you believed in eschatology and the creator of the world. You were actually a believer, in something that was illogical."

Eiko mocked him. There was nothing in her words that he could dispute, though, so he simply slumped into his chair. Both Akuto and Boichiro were believers in the Law of Identity. Eiko's face warped into a victorious grin.

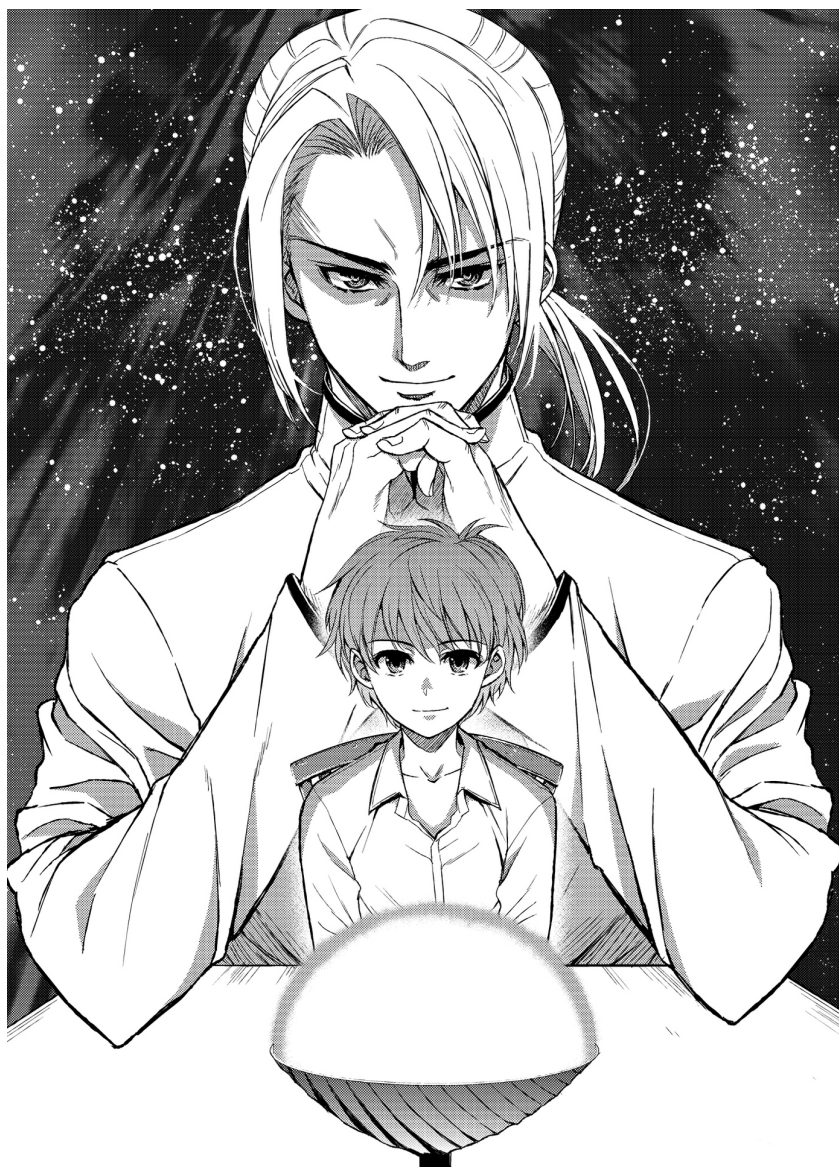
"I haven't felt this satisfied since I died," she said. But Hiroshi cut her off.

"Normally, when you die you don't get a chance to defend yourself. And the imprisoned are not facing justice, either."

Hiroshi's tone suddenly changed. He stepped away from the small table Akuto was sitting at and went around to the longer one.

"Maybe this is to be expected, since you're the Demon King, but you shouldn't need that kind of forgiveness. You don't want to claim that you are the Demon King, I'm sure."

Hiroshi's face had, at some point, turned into Boichiro's.



“Now it’s my turn. My prophecy is now clear. No, my predictions, based on precise data and experience, proved to be right. Of course they did. You ignored my warning. Now the outer gods have invaded us and turned everything into chaos.”

“I’ll have to admit my mistake there,” Akuto nodded.

“I wasn’t the one to be bound to the Law of Identity. But it could’ve been you, instead. You could’ve done what I tried to do, and saved the world. It could have continued eternally, as it was, in another universe.”

Boichiro’s words became heated.

“But you were obsessed with Rimu Sudo and Keena, too, weren’t you? What you’re talking about isn’t the world,” Akuto said, but Boichiro’s response was quick.

“If my ego and my values were in sync, what’s wrong with that? You had the right to destroy the world. Your decision to kill the gods then was wrong.”

“You’re right. I’d given up on thinking. I just let impulse take over and did what Keena calls ‘the way boys settle things.’ I just thought I was doing what Keena’s voice told me to.”

Akuto’s words were only coming out reluctantly. Boichiro laughed.

“...Even the space you have full control over was invaded by the outer gods. The real universe is doubtless no exception. If you attain true satisfaction and go to your death, this space will cease to exist. And then all will turn to dust. Even eternal beings like us, who’ve been reincarnated to carry out our roles, will cease to exist.”

“And I won’t ever save Keena, will I?”

“Outside of this world, Keena and the outer gods are of equal importance, no doubt. The Law of Identity itself is no exception either.”

Akuto thought for a moment about what Boichiro said. Then, he spoke.

“I’ll summon the outer gods.”

That surprised even Boichiro.

“Can you do that?”

“They’ve become stories too, or at least they should have. I don’t know if I can communicate with them on a deep level. We don’t share any stories. But it should be possible.”

The instant he said this, a black figure was in the chair. No,

everyone understood that it was there. When they turned to look at it, it was a shadow whose race couldn't even be determined. But when they looked away, there was someone there. They could see it out of the corner of their eye, but they couldn't make out its gender, let alone its expression. But when they went to get a closer look, it was only a shadow.

"I am the Void Universe," the black figure said. It was a strange voice, only audible if you strained to hear.

"The Void Universe?"

Akuto's question seemed to get through to it. There was a faint answer, difficult to hear, but clear if you focused on the sound and not the words.

"A universe with no stories. No matter. Only a single voice. The only things there are the occasional voices meaning things like 'you', 'thou', 'vous' or 'sue'."

Akuto reconstructed in his mind the meaning of the black figure's words. He continued his questions, hoping to learn more about this strange figure.

"Only a voice that says 'you'?"

"The word 'You' is shouted, and identity is born. When I first entered this world, it gave birth to a story. The second person pronoun. I am only voice. You! You! You!"

"But if there's a story, there shouldn't be a void."

"The one who is called is never met. No one is ever met. The voice is simply there, alone."

An image of the Void Universe's visual senses spread out before them. A darkness that wasn't a darkness. A void without even light. Only a nameless voice echoing. A voice that was only a single sound. Repeating and repeating. The voice never reached anyone. The only thing there was an existence that thought that there must be something else. It wasn't even clear if this existence was singular or a plurality. But someone was there, endlessly seeking another.

"Hell," Akuto whispered. The black figure, however, denied this.

"It's not even hell. It's not even pain. It's nothing."

"The only thing in the Void Universe is existence itself."

Suddenly there was another voice. When they looked, there was nobody there. But when they looked away, a figure in red appeared. It had the exact same nature as the figure in black.

"I am the Faceless Universe."

It was a different voice than the black figure. But its voice was just like the other, so faint it was hard to hear.

“...The same as the Faceless Power?” Akuto asked, and the red figure answered, and continued.

“In the Faceless Universe, existence melds together. Primitive life maintains external walls for the sake of its existence, but two life forms meeting results in the destruction of their walls. They devour each other. There, the existences point at each other, and shout, ‘You!’”

An image of the Faceless Universe’s vision spread out before them. There were multiple beings there. They were akin to an amoeba, or a water droplet in zero gravity, or perhaps a cloud, and were squirming in the void as if seeking each other out. They made the same sound as the ones in the void universe.

“You!”

Sometimes, they would run into each other by chance. And in that moment,

“You!”

The sound was the same as before, but now it sounded joyous.

“It’s a different ‘you’ than the Void Universe. It’s a ‘you’ of discovery,” Akuto whispered. The red figure agreed.

“Consumption. Only in that instant is another noticed. ‘You! I finally found you!’ it screams.”

The image changed. Two beings collided and became one. Then, another voice was born.

“But in the next instant, there’s no telling who’s who. However, what should be a single being is instead filled with a voice inside. Who! Who! Who! In the Faceless Universe, there is a single instant of ‘You’, followed by an eternity of terrible ‘Who!’.”

“When another is found, they cease to be another. However, others make you realize, whether you want to or not, that you yourself exist.”

Akuto whispered to himself as he gathered his thoughts. And then he had a realization, and let out a sharp gasp.

“The awfulness felt when you realized that you are you... The Law of Identity!”

When he realized this, another voice appeared.

“The Faceless Universe allows the Law of Identity to exist.”

Now it was a figure in blue.

“I am the Gravity Universe. There, existence becomes one with

its outer walls and gains mass.”

The image turned to that of the gravity universe. There was light and darkness. And existence there, while still amoeba-like, had clearly defined walls separating it from its exterior. They were like the walls of a cell, shining in the reflected light.

“You!” the voices shouted. But though it was the same sound, they sounded like an angry yell. This time, the beings were aiming for each other. They would fly at each other in order to collide.

“The walls mean that the cry of ‘Who!’ never escapes to the outside. The beings advance in search of others,” the blue figure said, as they continued to see what was happening. The beings collided, and the one with the weaker walls burst. Most of its insides would melt into space, but a tiny part was absorbed by the walls of the stronger.

“Consumption?” Akuto’s voice shook as he watched this. A voice was emitted from the beings that he’d never heard before.

“The loss of the walls means the loss of being itself. So when the walls collide, a scream is heard. ‘I killed! I killed! I killed!’”

As Akuto sat in silence, a new voice could be heard.

“The Gravity Universe allows pleasure to exist.”

This one was white. The images changed again. This time he saw the brilliant sparkling of stars. There was life there, but primitive. Single-celled organisms were starting to split.

“I am the Antigravity Universe. Here, existence increases in number. Walls swell and split.”

“Voices fill the space. Me! Me! Me!”

“Me!”

It was a voice of newborn joy.

“The Antigravity Universe allows love to exist.”

Beings there consumed each other, but the moment they collided, sometimes they shared their being, and gave birth to new existence.

“Me!”

“You!”

“I killed!”

“I increased!”

Lively voices filled the space.

“I guess the universe I know is really close. Is that all the universes, then?” Akuto asked. And the outer gods said no.



“These are the original models that gave birth to the universes.”

Their voices compelled him to look behind them. He did so, looking out towards the horizon. There were shadows! Shadows! Shadows! as far as he could see. These were not simple figures like the ones he'd seen so far. They had different clothes. Different genders. Their shadows flickered in the corner of his eye. And within them, they had billions of beings. Each of the shadows had ghosts within them, just like Akuto.

“Are they all like me?” he asked, and the outer gods disappeared without answering. The people, or universes, that he'd glimpsed vanished as well. Only Boichiro and Akuto remained at the table.

“They're probably the same as us.”

They sat in shocked silence for a while, but eventually Boichiro was the first to speak.

“They, and you, are universes. God Universes, I guess you could call them. No, you could say that until you unleashed the possibilities of the world, you alone were like them.”

Boichiro pointed at Akuto, Akuto let out a long sigh and nodded.

“The birth of a universe is like the birth of a story. If a universe is a collection of stories, there could be any number of beings on the outside that are like us.”

“Which means there should be a spectrum,” Boichiro said, suddenly sure of himself.

“A spectrum? Of what?” Akuto asked. And the outer gods responded.

“A spectrum. In other words, they can be divided into levels. Levels of ‘story density’, you could call it. Each of them has been turned into a story at different levels. That's one way to think of it, anyway.”

“And our level of storification is strong?”

“We realize our world is fictional. So it must be strong. Don't you think?”

Boichiro's words made Akuto remember something. Those stories which seemed under the outer gods' influence seemed to be those where the world's fictional nature could not be realized. These stories were always those of people who'd only been incarnated once.

"After looking outside, only now do I feel like I understand myself." Akuto nodded.

"But in the end, the outer gods themselves are fictional. They just can't tell the difference between gods, humanity, and ghosts themselves. Only when a higher being tells you, and your universe is walled off, can you clearly understand what's a god, what's a human, and what's a ghost. You understand who they are inside."

Akuto thought to himself as he listened to Boichiro's analysis.

"Now... that means we have to think of what we say to our own higher power in answer. I want to save not just what's inside me, but everything in the Law of Identity's universe. I want to free them from their stories. That is my wish," Akuto said. Now it was Boichiro's turn to think.

"...We'll just have to assume that stories are viruses. Originally, when living creatures were born from the anti-gravity universe, they should have been considered complete. No matter how complex a creature's cells become, and how complex their reflexes, creatures consume, kill, and give birth. That's all. There's no sin or forgiveness there. There can't be."

"But the outer gods brought the idea of an unreasonable death into me. Their story density should be low."

"Then an unreasonable death is natural. There's no reason needed for murder. That explains it."

"But we should still try to avoid meaningless murder."

"You only say that because the stories tell you that you should. But you said that stories were the greatest murderers of all."

Boichiro's words made Akuto pause in thought for a moment, and call someone else. He waved a hand out towards the horizon. A dark-skinned, heavily-built man walked towards them from beyond the horizon.

Marine.

The man who'd once lead the Republic, used the Faceless Power, and battled with Akuto. He was also the one who, through no will of his own, caused the destruction of the world.

"I feel like I've been called as a representative of ideology, and I have to say it upsets me."

Like the other ghosts that had been summoned, Marine opened with a complaint.

"Ghosts are always complaining to me." Akuto shrugged.

"Because, of course, you killed us. But you're here before me,

unafraid of my condemnation. You deserve credit for that, at least.”

Marine laughed loudly, and sat down in the chair with bold, exaggerated movements.

“If you’re my ghost, then that’s just me praising myself,” Akuto whispered.

“Don’t worry about it. Humans and ghosts are indistinguishable from the outside,” Marine said.

“Yeah. That’s starting to seem to me to be the reason why murder should be avoided. If you’re really someone else, people should have no laws but those of living things.”

“That’s the good part of stories. If you allow others to exist inside you as ghosts, you can love them, and thus avoid consuming and murdering them. Even if that gives you no advantages in reproducing and splitting.”

Marine looked at him as if surprised that it took Akuto this long to understand.

“But I’m looking at you as a manifestation of the bad side of stories. That’s why I’m here.”

Akuto looked back at Marine.

“That can only take us back to the first debate we began with. The nature of a ghost creates others. The ghosts of the Republic citizens were oppressed by the ghosts of the Empire. Pointing out that this oppression was only a fantasy also means throwing away the good side of stories,” Marine responded.

Akuto flinched, as if he’d been caught by a weakness in his argument.

“I see. And I was a man who was willing to throw that good side away.”

“You were a man without love, is what that means.” Marine laughed.

“And that’s my sin?”

Akuto always had a serious look on his face, but now his expression was completely frozen. Marine flashed a natural smile.

“My friend, the answer of the condemned has been given. Isn’t that enough?”

“But, what does that matter? Basically, I’m stuck, unable to break out from within myself. I can’t free everyone, if it’s been decided that I’m carrying a contradiction I can’t solve.”

“Then perhaps I have a solution.”

Suddenly Boichiro spoke.

“First, erase everything but us.”

Akuto didn't know what to make of that.

“What are you going to do?”

“Just do it.”

There was resolve in Boichiro's words. So Akuto did as he was told, erasing both Marine and the table. There was silence, as Akuto and Hiroshi sat alone across from each other.

“Will this... do?”

“Yes.”

Hiroshi nodded, and began to speak, as if he was reluctant to say anything.

“Actually, I'd been resolved to do this from the start.”

“Resolved?”

“No, I mean I knew from the start. That it was a problem you wouldn't be able to solve yourself.”

“That's rather rude... But yes, I'm afraid you're right. There's a reason they called me the Demon King. I'm a weapon. In the end, all I have is logic, not love.”

“You should've noticed that when you were alive.” Hiroshi laughed.

Akuto laughed too, this time.

“You've got that right.”

“Now, on to the point...” Hiroshi leaned forward.

“Make a world where I'm the hero.”

“Huh?” Akuto was stunned.

“A world where I'm the hero, I said. One with as low a story density as possible.”

“You just want to be the hero? ... No, that doesn't feel likely.”

“Correct. A world where I'm a normal person. That's what I want you to make.”

Hiroshi was serious. And that only made Akuto more confused.

“What happens then?”

“I'm going to redo my life, with my memories, in a world which isn't very story-fied. And there, I'm going to write a story about destroying stories.”

Akuto's eyes went wide.

“That's... an unexpected idea.”

“Stories have their good sides... so maybe it's impossible to get rid of them entirely. But if nothing else, I'll be able to put an end to your story.”

“In other words, you’re going to write my story... and end it.”

“Yes.”

Akuto wasn’t sure what to think. This was an idea he’d never come up with.

“Is it okay for me to ask you that?”

He couldn’t predict what would happen, but he knew that if it worked, it would put him on a course for a true ending.

“It’s fine. It’s something only I can do, and anyway, killing you is my goal. And by doing that, I can save this world. That’s how it feels to me,” Hiroshi said softly.

Akuto stared him in the eyes for a moment, and then smiled.

“Alright. I’ll rebuild the afterlife then. You want me to strengthen the influence of the outer gods, and return the world to its pre-mana-civilization form, right?”

“That’s right. Maybe sometime in the 1990s?”

“I’ll try it. How it works... is up to you.” Akuto balled up the world in his hands again, and then let it spread out wide.

5 - Incarnation

Our minds are infected by a virus called “stories” that someone injected into our brains. That’s what I said. We must abandon stories. I said that too. And I’ve seen the first humans, and the birth of stories, too.

The result of all that is the person I am now. The writer of this story.

But as I said at the beginning, it took me until the death of my ex-girlfriend to realize my destiny. Living in a world with a low story density had given me what amounted to amnesia. Perhaps I needed an event that was like an overdose of stories to remember.

After my memories came back, I spent a fairly long time writing about the life of Akuto Sai. This, I believe, is the end of that process.

But it wasn’t easy.

Around 2010, when the story began to reach its end, it took courage to start writing. I had no ideas in my brain, just a dull headache. It was like I was being slowly strangled by an invisible noose around my throat. There was a strange, unpleasant feeling, a weight that made it hard to move, or hard to even stand up. This unpleasant feeling only grew as my desire to write down these words increased.

I knew what writers had always called this. A slump. Writer’s block.

Someone of a more traditional literary bent might’ve called it a devouring mold, or a stalking black dog. But I gave it a stupider name: the crazy monster. The crazy monster sat in the corner of the room, and whenever I stared at it, it would leap on my shoulders.

If I slept, or did something to distract myself that involved no mental work whatsoever, it would eventually vanish. But during the times when that wasn’t possible, I would have to do a little exercise to get the unpleasantness off my shoulders.

The problem was, I would have to exercise to the point where it put a serious strain on me for it to have any effect, and this was also a bit of a gamble. Sometimes it would help, and other times, it created a pain in my shoulders that made me want to throw up. The

pain got to the point where it was devouring my life.

By the time I realized that I couldn't defeat it, or tame it, it finally occurred to me what it was. It was lightness. The lighter I tried to make what I was writing, the harder it became to write.

I need to elaborate more about what I mean by "lightness".

Normally, the word would refer to something superficial. Something that didn't make you think. But in this case, I mean something virtual.

First, the main characters had left their physical bodies behind. By this I mean that they were capable of surviving physical shocks that would kill an ordinary human, and sometimes would display superhuman powers. For this reason, the characters had personalities that were extremely slanted in one direction or another, and seemed inhuman.

The story was written to have a happy ending, and even if there was some unhappiness, it was there for a reason. Sometimes, to avoid an unhappy story, the characters wouldn't age, and their minds wouldn't mature. When I tried to write these "light" stories, the unpleasant feeling was always there.

So what if I tried to write a "heavy" story? I tried it, just to get my mind off things, and the more "virtual" it became (that is, even if the characters seemed real, if the story was still fictional) the more the "crazy monster" would be waiting for me.

It was clear that this was an obstacle set by the stories themselves.

I felt like I'd seen the core essence of stories. This was a story written to destroy stories, and it was clear that the stories were fighting back. Looking back, there had been many obstacles in my way up until this point, but all of them were caused by the stories controlling my memories and actions. This goes for how books sell, too.

People are ashamed of "light" stories. But the lightest stories are the ones they love. Many people buy light stories in secret, stories that satisfy their base urges. The heavy stories, on the other hand, are the ones that are said to capture the essence of humanity, and those who write them are praised and called "intellectuals". And even the most impossible stories are allowed to be believed if they become the text of a religion.

Are stories like gravity? Do they pin us to the Earth with their weight, and make us avoid lightness? And if the true nature of

humans is to seek lightness...

I heard a sound of some kind, in my mind. I knew exactly what I had to do to complete my mission.

This world was created by the Demon King. And it was my job to lead the Demon King, and his sunken thoughts, to “lightness”.

The method immediately occurred to me.

The Law of Identity would have access to this world. That much was clear from how Keena tried to stop the Demon King. The Law of Identity wanted a real ending. So I would show her the story’s destruction.

Looking back at the way this world was created, it was clear that the Law of Identity must be hiding, unseen by the Demon King. The Demon King was omnipresent in this world, but without the characters’ identities, that is, in the mathematical sense, unless the characters were themselves, the stories couldn’t exist.

But the Demon King had failed to find the Law of Identity in this world. Most likely, this was because of his preconceived notion that Keena was asleep.

Put another way, my goal was to bring the Demon King and the Law of Identity together. And to do it, I would need “a story that denies stories.” And the search for it would be the last story.

“I have no idea what any of the things you just said meant.”

A rather foul-mouthed Junko Hattori said to me, as we sat in a cafe in Kamata station. I’d called her here to explain this. Or try to explain it, at least.

Hattori was sharp, but she could be stubborn and prone to reject anything she saw as a flight of fancy. I’ll probably have to explain to you who Junko is. When the Demon King rolled back the story to around the year 2000, we were given different personalities and lives.

The world was created from nothing in 1990, and we were all given false memories of the past. So in this world, Junko Hattori was an old co-worker of mine. Her old appearance, and her old story, had been taken from her, and now she was a thin, and to be honest, plain-looking girl.

“In other words, this world was just made a bit ago... Well, about ten years ago, in fact. And what I want you to do is bring back your old memories as that character,” I continued. She may not know what I was talking about, but if I kept appealing to her memories, maybe I could get through somehow.

“I remember that from an old manga. A past life, isn’t that what they call it?”

Junko seemed interested. Before my memories came back, I would come talk to her about my novels and writing work, so this wasn’t the first bizarre thing I’d told her. Another person might’ve thought I was crazy, but she was used to it. But that also meant that she was making a division between fiction and reality. It was difficult for her to recognize that her own story was “light”. If she did, after all, it would mean she was going crazy.

“...Well, you can think of it as something like a past life, sure. A game we’re playing. But I’m seriously looking for it... So um, play along. Is there anybody that we both remember, in our past memories?”

“There’s no way that I can remember every single person I’ve ever met.” Junko said, stirring her iced coffee with a straw and looking vaguely annoyed.

“For now, let’s just say the people that helped you become a writer.”

“Okay, well...”

Junko took out a notebook, and began to sift through page after page of bookmarked notes. Between two of the pages was sandwiched a little folder, from which she removed a folded up sheet of copy paper. It was a list of names and addresses in tiny font.

“This is the list of people from my gaming group. Her. Her.”

Junko pointed to a strange looking name.

“That’s not her real name, is it? It’s pretty ridiculous.”

“We were young, after all. It’s a pen name. But that’s all anybody ever called her. Thanks to her, I got big into video games. And that’s how I became a writer.”

Junko laughed, thinking back on the memories. I copied down the address.

“What’s her real name?”

“Oh, what was it? ... I forget. Hmm, I used to remember it...”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. So, she’s someone you knew from a game?”

Junko folded up the old, worn paper like it was a treasured memory.

The gaming group she was referring to was a tabletop gaming RPG, where players gathered around a table and participated in a

shared story. Part of the fun was enjoying watching the “story” come to life through shared conversation.

“I’d love to play again sometime, but I don’t have the time these days. Are you going to go looking for her? If you find her tell her I said ‘Hi,’” Junko said with a smile.

I understood well that she’d become a writer because she once enjoyed creating stories. I went to the address I’d copied down, but it wasn’t a residential address. A new building was standing there instead. The apartments that had been there before had been torn down.

I remembered that Junko said she’d been into tabletop RPGs in college. Her friend with the strange pen name must’ve lived in a run-down apartment, like many poor college students. It would be a pain to try and track down someone who once lived in a torn-down building. Instead, it would be faster to track down my reincarnated (?) companions first. The next person I was able to get in touch with was Yoshie.

“You want to know why I got into the writing business? Man, you always ask me the weirdest shit.”

She was several times nastier than Junko. Sometimes she went beyond “sarcastic” and crossed the line into “bitch”. She was small, and her build was frail, but her limbs were fast and her voice was loud. She wasn’t a genius, unfortunately, but she was still an oddball with glasses.

She worked for an editing production department in Shibuya, and I’d worked with her once in the past. I’d gotten an appointment to meet her at her office, claiming it was for work. She lacked the ability to listen to anything anybody else said, so I wasn’t going to tell her about memories from past lives, or anything of that sort.

“Stop living in a fantasy world,” she’d said.

But she’d more than happily tell you stories about her favorite idol group, so it was hard to say if she didn’t live in a fantasy world herself. To be honest, it was impossible to understand how she’d gotten into the story business.

“I’m doing research into relationships writers have. Sometimes when writers are the same age, they get influenced by the same things,” I said, lying to her to change the subject.

“Well, for me it was because a friend told me it was an easy way to make money,” Yoshie said.

She had no writing experience, and no interest in books or

movies. But a friend of hers, a professional writer, had introduced her to the job.

“There was nothing I really wanted to do, after all. When I got the job, though, it was all office grunt work. Tell the company to raise my salary.”

“I’m just a contractor.”

“Then tell them I’m a hard worker. Also, buy me dinner.”

Conversations with Yoshie always went this way. She never thought too hard about anything, and was always looking for an easy way out. I wanted to end the conversation as fast as possible, so I asked for the name of the person who’d gotten her into the business.

“They live in Yokohama. I think they’re still an editing production writer.”

She gave me the name of the company and I wrote it down.

“Anyway, why’s a writer like you asking something so pointless?” she asked.

Of course, she had no writing talent at all even though she’d originally been hired as a writer. Instead of being fired, she was reassigned to the editorial department (Maybe the person who’d introduced her had some pull?). So normally, her job was to boss around writers, at least according to her, and she was constantly complaining about everything writers did.

“You wouldn’t understand,” I said, without the slightest doubt in my voice. I couldn’t expect the same brilliance that the old Yoshie had. Right now she was only interested in personal advancement. Or more specifically, money.

She had a man, somewhere, it seemed, but most of her interest was in money. It was a happy thing, in its own way.

“But since you’re in this business, you must’ve been influenced by something a writer wrote, at least once. Or maybe not?”

I asked. Her answer was immediate.

“I watch the drama TV shows on Fridays. I always wonder what’s coming in the next episode, you know? There’s this one side character who’s super cool...”

Yoshie began to chatter on. I waited for her to finally pause, and then ended the conversation. Thinking about it, though... This Yoshie seemed far too uninterested in stories. Or perhaps you could say she was unaware of them.

She responded to “light” stories, but she didn’t realize that the

love of money that controlled her was a story itself, and that's why she hadn't even succeeded in getting any money. Unless you were greedy enough to know you were greedy, or capable of controlling your greed, saving money was impossible.

But she wasn't as unlucky as she always said. Someday she would get married to someone, and live a fairly happy life. Well, if this world lasted forever, that is. In the end, stories had saved her, too. "Light" stories brought her rest from the toils of her everyday life, and her mind was simple enough to ensure that she unconsciously obeyed the "heavy" stories.

The stories were her master.

Suddenly, that thought came to me. But when the thought became language, at the same time, I felt myself feeling doubt. If this world was completely real, and the things in my mind were a delusion, then the idea that stories were a virus, and that I, the only man aware of this, had a special role to play, was no different than arrogant madness.

In the end, I had no choice but to believe that I would know at the end of my journey whether what I was doing was right or not. I managed to get in touch with the editing production company that Yoshie had introduced me to. All I had to do was ask if the person Yoshie had mentioned was still there, so a single call was sufficient.

The answer was simple.

"The person you're referring to did work here, yes. But they quit last year," the CEO of the company told me directly.

I asked the name.

"Um... the name was... XXXX... No, Soga."

The first name the CEO gave me was a pen name. Surprisingly, it matched the pen name that Junko had given me, too. And her name was Soga, too... I tried to hide the excitement in my voice, as I simply asked them to call me if they had any work, and then hung up. It was the same person who'd altered the course of each of our lives, and that person was the Law of Identity. The whole thing began to seem much more real.

The CEO had given me the address. Now I just had to go there.

Between Yokohama station and old Takashimacho station, I found it: a room in a condo building. The surrounding area was strange: neither residential nor commercial. Just rows of paved, but empty, lots and trees planted to hide the empty spaces under the bridges. I was only a few minutes from the hustle and bustle of

Yokohama, but it felt strange, like it was inside a void. The condo building was a big one, and fancy too, but it felt strangely run-down. I felt the strange lack of light and eerie emptiness that you always feel in places where it's not safe.

I looked at the name outside the door.

It didn't say "Soga". Maybe this wasn't the right place, but it was worth a try. Even if someone else lived here now, if she'd moved somewhere close, they might be able to tell me where her mail was forwarded to. I rang the bell and asked for "Soga." The door opened, and someone I knew well came out.

"You finally made it!"

It was Fujiko. Of course, in this world she had a different name. She was pretty, with long black hair, but that was the only thing she'd retained from her fictional counterpart. She was married, and not even my type, but I always felt nervous around her.

When it was just the two of us, the people around us would often stare out of curiosity. But everything else about her was normal, and she was far friendlier than she looked. She was an unsuccessful horoscope writer, married to a public servant. She and I often talked because of our jobs.

"You? Live here?" I asked, so shocked I couldn't even form a coherent sentence.

"You're here about Soga, right? Come in."

Fujiko slipped on her sandals and opened wide the door. I could see a wooden table, a shelf for dishes, and white wallpaper behind her. Nothing out of the ordinary. But this didn't seem like where she lived with her husband. From the number of dishes and the slippers on the floor, however, it was clear this room belonged to a single person.

"I've got a lot of questions, but..."

I said, and Fujiko pointed at me with a dazzling smile.

"Your memories came back, right? Wow, that was incredible, wasn't it?"

"You mean, of Constant Magical Academy?"

I said, stammeringly.

"Right! That was amazing! Like a fantasy book!"

She was so excited she forgot to tell me to sit down. I'd finally hit the jackpot. I was feeling a little dizzy.

"I'd thought it turned into something a little more serious," I said, a little sadly.

That calmed her down a bit, but since there was no one in this world who remembered her, she had a lot she wanted to say. So we started to talk about old times, to help bring back my memories and to make sure that hers were correct. Her memories and mine matched.

What was strange was that both of us had our own personalities here, and it seemed to us like the whole thing had been a dream. Even as we spoke about our old world, our personalities remained the same as they were. I didn't forget that I was an author, and Fujiko remained a friendly fortune-teller, instead of dreaming of world conquest.

"It's strange thinking that those people were us, isn't it?" Fujiko said.

"But there's no other way to explain why we both remember the same things."

"I never read them before, but I'll check out your novels."

"You didn't read them?"

My shoulders slumped.

"...If I did, I would've doubted my memories."

"That's true. At first, when I was writing, I didn't really know what I was doing myself."

"So, about Soga..." Fujiko began."

"That's it. Soga lives here, right?"

"Yeah." She nodded, lowering her voice.

"Why are you making that face?"

"Oh, I was told to keep it a secret."

"A secret?"

"Well... my memories came back a little sooner than yours. You know how sometimes you can do fortune telling based on your past life? I was doing that when I remembered."

"And how did you reach Soga?"

"Well, the first thing I did was doubt my memories. I mean, the ones from before 1990."

"Yeah. Those were all fake memories that we were implanted with."

"I went thinking back through those memories, my first memories from when I arrived in this world. And Soga was there."

"I see. So I was on the right track too. Both Junko and Yoshie got into this line of work because of Soga."

"But you're different from the rest of us."

"I am?"

"Yup. She only sent you a letter, she says."

"A letter?"

"Yeah. She said... she couldn't meet you in person."

"Why?"

"Hmm... she explained it to me, but I didn't really understand it," Fujiko said. "I think it's because Akuto sees the world through your eyes. So you can't be allowed to meet the Law of Identity."

For some reason, she sounded like she was apologizing. I began to get worried.

"But I can still talk to her, just not in person, right?"

"You can talk to her online, she says."

Fujiko brought over a memo pad that was next to the dish shelf. It had a string of letters that looked like an internet phone address.

"That's pretty cold. It's a lot... lighter... than what I was looking for. But 'light' is what I was seeking, so maybe it's perfect for the end of this journey."

"You're in no hurry, right?" Fujiko said. There was probably still something she hadn't said.

"Yeah," I answered.

She was enjoying the memories, I could tell. To me, those days were "heavy", but to her they were fun. It was late at night by the time I got home. I booted up my computer and the internet dialing software. If I could talk to her, the sooner the better. I called. The answer was immediate.

"I've been waiting."

The voice was calm and cold. There was no video.

"Soga?"

"That name is correct."

If my memories were right, Keena Soga didn't talk like this. It was the Law of Identity.

"The letter I got wasn't from Soga, though."

I remembered the letter that Fujiko had mentioned. It was the letter that caused me to become an author. A letter from a childhood friend. Of course, now I knew that that memory was a fake. At the time, the letter had been strangely moving. It was a memory that I didn't want to believe was faked, even if I knew it was.

"I'm sorry to say this, because it feels like I was deceiving you, but I'm the one who wrote that letter."

“Hearing that makes me feel better. Well, maybe it doesn’t, actually... Do you have records of being alive in this world, too?”

“Yes. As you found out, after that, I got to know everyone, married someone you don’t know, and had a family.”

I felt insulted. Of course, I’d had no memories of meeting my childhood friend after that, but obviously I’d always felt a bit of an attraction to the person who’d told me I had so much talent, and even secretly written me a letter.

“That’s a shitty way to end a story. Especially since I can’t even see you.”

“From your perspective, I’m just a story too, after all,” the Law of Identity said.

She was right. I was just talking to her over the internet. If I wanted to start doubting things, I could do it easily. Fujiko knew Junko, so she might have found out that I’d been asking weird questions. And if she read the book I published, she’d be able to play along with my conversation. It would be simple to pretend to be the Law of Identity.

“Is this your way of telling me that even if you’re a fake, it doesn’t matter?”

“Even if it’s all a lie, what’s important is that the ending satisfies him.”

“By him, you mean the Demon King. I thought the goal was to satisfy you, the Law of Identity. You’re going to save everyone, right?”

“No. Or I guess you could say, it’s both of us. You recorded the story of the Demon King. Which means that you understood the true nature of this world. So if you’re satisfied, that means he’s satisfied. And of course, I have to be satisfied too.”

The Law of Identity’s voice was strangely flat, like it was being altered by a machine.

“So we all need to be satisfied with the ending, is what you’re saying.”

“Yes. So please, show me. Show me the records you wrote.”

I did as I was asked, and sent my final file, that is, the last volume of my novel, over the internet. I heard the sound that indicated it had been received. And for a while, I waited. I couldn’t say a word until she spoke first.

The records were simply that, records. It was impossible to find meaning in them. But the “stories”, got involved whether you

wanted them to or not. Right now, “heaviness” was winning.

“Do you think it was the mind that was infected by the virus? Or the body?”

That was the first thing the Law of Identity asked. I thought it was my duty to answer, even if I didn’t understand.

“Both... right? I think it was the body that was infected first, but it’s the mind that’s being controlled.”

There was a silence, and then another question.

“You believed that the truth he needed to know was the end of the story, and that by knowing it, people could be saved. Is that right?”

It was a strange question. What was she trying to learn from that?

“I can’t be sure, but... that’s what I was thinking. He tried to save the world. No, I think I believed that if the afterlife existed, and the Law of Identity existed, then there must be some salvation.”

“Since you know that much, I’ll share with you my last words.”

“Go ahead.”

I waited. But there was a silence like she was hesitating.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, I’ll tell them to you.”

The Law of Identity said.

“You have been made incarnate, and are trapped here. That is the role of the hero. The world will be saved, and those who lived there, and those who were able to entrust themselves to the lightness of stories, will someday come unto me.”

And then there were no more words.

“Hey! Hey!” I shouted. But there was no answer. Instead, her account had been deleted.

Maybe this was all a setup. Or maybe I’d really gone insane.

These words, and the despair they brought with them, echoed in my mind.

Something had ended, probably. No, not probably. Certainly. That much I knew. For sure. But I didn’t know what had ended. It felt like I knew for certain that tomorrow would come. The sun would come up, and before long, it would be deadline time.

But it was over. His story was over. What Akuto Sai wanted, the salvation of the people, was over.

Dawn came without me getting any sleep. I went outside. The town was the same as it ever was. I was able to go to the coffee

shop and order a hot dog and coffee. The clerk at the counter was real.

I called Fujiko around noon. She didn't remember what had happened yesterday, but she seemed very happy. Yes, just like when she'd been talking about her old memories.

Junko contacted me, asking me to join her gaming group. She'd gotten back in the mood to play. I didn't bother trying to contact Yoshie.

No, all three of them were no longer Fujiko, Junko, or Yoshie. From now on I should call them by their names from this world. I started to walk to work. I felt something clink at my footsteps, and heard a metallic sound.

It was a ball and chain wrapped around my legs.

I could feel the heavy chains around me... at least, that's how it felt. It was the "heavy" story. We believe these heavy stories that bind us are worthy of our praise, but sometimes, the "light" stories help us forget them, if only for a second. But they lack bodies, and so they "lightly" flew away from us, leaving just a hint as to how to escape from stories.

We, the ones with bodies, are the ones who circle endlessly. We fill this place, simply wandering forever.

6 - Evolution

Korone slowly awoke to the sound of someone calling her.

"Please wait until I've restored my memories. ...Excuse me. My body's oil viscosity has increased. Can you hand me an oil can?"

Korone sat up out of her futon, took the oil can, and gulped it down like cola.

"I'd rather not waste time recounting the exact number, but it's been over 10,000 years, Akuto."

Korone smiled.

"Yeah, sorry about that. But in the dimension I was in, time didn't matter," Akuto said, looking apologetic.

"I don't understand, but I'll choose to assume that something has been resolved."

She got out of bed and looked around. The passing of ten thousand years had caused the room to decay, but the facility was still functional. This was the station where Keena had gone to sleep.

"Is it just you?" she asked, still wearing her pajamas. Akuto was the only one in the room.

"That's right. But if I call them, everyone will come."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Korone replied, confused. She tried to read data from the gods and failed, so she simply tilted her head in confusion.

"The gods won't answer. The teleportation circles won't work. Humanity is gone."

"How?"

"It's fine. You'll understand later. By the way..."

Akuto pointed out the window.

"Has the Earth always been like this?"

"Yes. It's too early for the surviving life to flourish, still," Korone said, looking down at the Earth below her. After the asteroid impact, there was nothing left of the Earth's surface but a single small sea. The rest was just brown rubble.

"Hiroshi did his best, but he failed."

"He tried to stop the asteroid?"

"Yes."

"I see. That's the kind of guy he was. He saved me, too. I think

he's the only one I can call a true friend. Oh, but when I said I could call everybody, that didn't mean I could call him."

His expression turned dark for a moment.

"You've been saying the strangest things since I woke up. What happened?"

Akuto nodded.

"It's hard to explain. But it's okay. We'll have lots of time later. I think I can take you, too."

Akuto winked at her.

"You're not who you used to be, are you? Either way, if you have a plan, then shall we wake up the Empress?"

Korone looked towards the corner of the room. The coffin-shaped cryogenics device was there.

"Go ahead and do it."

"I will, then. But if you can summon anyone, shouldn't you summon someone to take care of her?"

Korone asked, but Akuto shook his head.

"If other people are here, it will ruin our touching reunion."

"I see. But please give me a moment. It would be rude to do it in my pajamas, so I'm going to change."

Korone went to take off her pajamas.

"Hurry up," he said, as he began to operate the cold sleep device's panel. The machine was working, but it would take a little time for it to wake her up.

"Oh...?"

Korone sounded vaguely impressed when she'd finished stripping down to her underwear.

"You're not freaked out by the sight of a half-naked girl anymore. I thought something had changed. I guess you're not a virgin anymore, then."



“Come on now...”

Akuto trailed off, but he didn't deny it.

“What a boring, grown-up response. You are grown up now, though, aren't you?”

Korone made a motion like she was wiping away sarcastic, invisible tears.

“So, who did you lose your virginity to?”

“Would you not ask that?” Akuto sighed.

Korone put on her uniform just as Akuto finished working at the console. The countdown to awaken Keena from cold sleep began.

“This is a very emotional moment. Life on Earth is about to begin again, right? Can you rebuild the Empire?” Korone asked.

Akuto shook his head.

“Nope. We're not going to Earth.”

“But there aren't any planets we can move to... There are no stars outside of this solar system...” Korone said, surprised. Akuto seemed to be trying to figure out how to explain.

“What is it? I wish you'd stop hiding things and explain...”

“No. We're going to evolve.”

“Evolve? That's a strange thing to say. The evolution of life, to begin with...” Korone started to explain, but Akuto cut her off.

“No, I know. But evolution is all I can call it. In other words, we're going to shift to another universe.”

“... Shift?”

“That's right. Essentially...”

Just as he began to explain, the cold sleep device began to emit a beeping sound. He cut off his explanation and pressed the button to open the lid. The heavy lid made a clanging noise as cold air poured out from it. The lid slid off to the side. What looked like a coffin now seemed like a bed.

It was an empress, not a princess, that was sleeping here, but she was still a snow-white beauty. She was sleeping peacefully in the cold. It was like she'd just dozed off a moment ago, but to Akuto, this was something he'd been longing for for a very long time.

“I guess you should wake her up with a kiss, shouldn't you?”

Korone meant it as a joke, but Akuto said nothing as he leaned over Keena. But when he did, he could feel her breath tickling his cheek.

“She’s already awake,” he said. Keena almost burst out laughing, her eyes still closed, but he quickly pushed up his lips to hers. There was a long kiss. Her arms wrapped around his back, and the two of them stood up.

“I missed you.”

“For me, it’s barely been any time at all.”

“Then I guess I didn’t make things hard for you,” Akuto said, relieved.

“But...” Keena paused for a second. “I think I had a long dream. So I know a little about what happened over... there!”

Keena pinched Akuto’s side from above his clothes.



“Oww! Do you mean... Oh!”

Akuto realized that the Law of Identity knew what he was up to in the afterlife, and began to sweat. She was talking about Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie.

“No, um... well...” he stammered, but Keena just smiled.

“But I forgive you. From now on, we’ll always be together, right?” Keena said, and held his hand tightly.

“I don’t know what our life will be like, though.”

“Hmm... We’re heading to where all stories end. Where humanity will always strive to go... That’s what she says.”

Keena must have heard this from the Law of Identity, because she seemed to not know what it meant.

“The place humanity always strives to go, huh?” Akuto whispered.

Humanity would dream an eternal dream through “light” stories, striving for a place where the weight of the stories would eventually become zero.

“We’re doing a ritual to create an imaginary body, is that right?” Akuto asked.

“I guess so. I don’t really think I could understand the details, but it’s basically our real marriage, right?”

Keena spoke excitedly, and began without even waiting for Akuto. It was a ritual where not only stories, but the body, would cross over zero and become imaginary. They would create a negative body, an imaginary body, the first step to becoming something not of this world. Data, existing as imaginary numbers.

A space without time.

A place where physical laws ended.

Beyond causality.

Beyond reality.

The salvation of all beings.

Keena took Akuto’s hand. All the whispering souls moved from Akuto to Keena in order to become negative. Voices were heard. Many voices filled them. Junko’s. Yoshie’s. Fujiko’s. Lily’s. Men. Women. So many feelings.

“What does it feel like to be saved?”

“I don’t know, ’cause I’ve never felt it. But, well, we’ll know when we do experience it.”

“It will feel like I’m truly connected to Akuto for the first time!”

“Life must be really easy when you’re that air-headed. I guess to me, it doesn’t matter.”

“President, you should get a little more greedy.”

“Greedy for food, gyah.”

“Gugah.”

“Will our desire for honor be fulfilled as well?”

“You barbarians only think of hem-hem when you think of salvation!”

“Silence, you tan-colored barbarian! It’s the Student Council President, not me, who lives life on easy street!”

“I just don’t stress, is all. Anyway, there’s a few more people who we should be seeing, right?”

“We won’t see them if the author’s forgotten about them.”

“That’s a pretty meta comment... is that okay?”

“But if we try to do everyone we’ll end up with rubbers, and then that fly-guy too.”

“That... would not be what I wanted.”

“Want to call the guy who ate all that ramen?”

“No!”

“It’s wrong to discriminate against male characters.”

“Headmaster!”

“But still, outside of me, most of the characters are basically the same as the author. They’re not here.”

“What about that black metal band who worshipped the Demon King? Those guys had names, right?”

“They get saved too, huh?”

“Anybody who’s got a soul gets saved, I think.”

“Hmph. Well, forget it then! Everybody, come on out!” Junko yelled.

All the souls gathered. Anger, sorrow, jealousy, envy, all of those feelings were spat out, to be left behind in this world. The universe began to contract. Space folded around Akuto, and closed.

“Are you taking me too?” Korone asked, as she was absorbed into Akuto.

“Just like Zero, a personality can affix itself to a liradan and gain a self. You have a self too.”

Akuto smiled. His body began to shrink as well. He was absorbed into Keena too.

Eventually Keena turned inside out, and disappeared into this new world — the anti-universe. All that was left was void was

within void. Void without even words. In other words, a new void universe was born.

But just before that happened...

A conversation was held in a fraction of an instant, in the smallest possible amount of time that could be recorded. One thing was left behind in the void universe.

Just one thing.

“Am I... am I left behind?”

The voice of the hero. It was Hiroshi, and Boichiro, and Kento, and the author too.

“Yes. As you were told already, you will be left behind,” the Law of Identity answered.

She’d looked like a goddess of salvation, but she was a cruel goddess as well.

“Why?!”

A scream.

A scream of pain.

He’d half-expected it. But he’d hoped there would be salvation for him too. That hope was betrayed.

“You must leave behind stories as stories. So that the next souls can go to that place as well.”

He shook his head, as if he found this impossible to believe.

“That’s so cruel...!”

“The concept of ‘cruel’ is only something you feel because you view things through stories. You will simply start over from the beginning. In the next instant, you’ll go to the void universe, and then you will shift to the faceless universe, and then the gravity universe. Though it may take tens of thousands of years.”

“Don’t say that! Am I starting the story over from scratch?”

“There’s nothing that can be done about it. Because you are you.”

“Because I am me? I can’t escape from that.”

“That is called the Law of Identity.”

“I’m going to become the Law of Identity?”

“You will be the next Law of Identity. If you are next to be saved, it will be when you become the guide for the next group of people. When you lead the stories that are trapped by gravity to lightness.”

“But that’s so sad... I have to leave everyone behind...”

“In the next moment, even sadness will no longer exist. This is

not a goodbye. There were other souls besides you in this story, 'Demon King Daimaou,' that were not saved. So if you become the next Law of Identity, you won't be alone."

This conversation took place in the smallest amount of time possible, but in the hero's next conscious moment, he was in the void universe, where time did not exist.

The hero thought for eternity. He would mumble to himself, thinking of who he would call as a witness to the fact that he was still sane. But the answer was the same. All he would do was speak.

"Anyone?"

He would search.

"I found someone!"

He would cry.

He couldn't help but create stories.

Aiming for the greatest salvation, and heading for the worst.

But even so—

If he kept going—

Somewhere far away—

There was a faint vision he'd seen once, just for an instant—

Something he prayed wasn't an illusion—

If he could—

If he could get there—

What would he do, again?

"Know that there is still more to come."

He understood. He would begin again.



Afterword

I apologize for the long, long wait. It's me, Shotaro Mizuki. Thank you for buying this book, and thank you for reading all the way to the end. I really mean it.

For those of you who are just now seeing this, I hope you'll pick up all the volumes.

I'm not sure you'll be able to enjoy it if you just pick up this volume, but if you've already seen the anime you can start from volume 6.

As an author, I was prepared for this book to take three years, but that was only going to happen if I stuck to a regular schedule.

In the end, it took 6 years.

From the perspective of my readers, especially those of you who are students, that was a long, long time.

Long enough to go from a middle schooler to university exams.

Looking back to that time in my own life, each individual year felt like it lasted forever.

I know that this is not a great thing for an author to say, but my policy for this series has been "just keep writing the next part and see how far you can take it," and the ending became something pretty difficult to understand.

I think the fact that six years passed worked to my benefit here.

For those of you who didn't understand this at first, I think after you go and read a bunch of other books and then come back and read this one, you might understand what I was getting at.

Now, in an industry where so many light novels come to sudden conclusions, I'm pleased that I was able to finish this story.

Not only that, it was a wonderful experience to have a drama CD, a manga by my illustrator, as well as an anime.

I'm grateful to all of the people involved.

As for what's been going on in my life, if you'll read the book, I can guarantee you that it's more or less as I described.

But it feels like I've gone through what I wrote.

I still intend to continue being an author, so if you see the name Mizuki in the future, I hope you'll remember me. For now, though, goodbye.

April, 2014, Shotaro Mizuki



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